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# GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN AN AGE OF CONSUMERISM

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A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Joel R. Puce

November 2011

Advisor: Dr. Micheline R. Ishay

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation traces the emergence of the global human rights movement, investigates the role of popular culture as a vehicle for mobilization, and critically examines why the movement has failed to adequately politicize its supporters in the process. Beginning in the mid-1970s, a broad shift began to take place in which ordinary people were routinely confronted with human suffering, as conflict and crisis assumed a role as ritualized news events. The public response to these phenomena demonstrated a capacity for solidarity and engagement based on cosmopolitan premises. The inception of a collective ethos of compassion, an awareness of the other based on empathy, can be considered a symptom of globalization, of a moral variety, and is a byproduct of shifting economic trends, advances in technology, and efforts toward transnational organization. Support for human rights advocacy has gained traction as a mainstream social cause and provides a set of principles with which average people mediate the world and their role in it. Yet, this transformation did not occur spontaneously, but rather was deliberately cultivated by movement architects through a series of popular culture mechanisms. However, the methods and strategies deployed to enlist the public in defense of human rights shaped the substance of their engagement. This dissertation addresses the discrepancy between the political content of advocacy campaigns and the failure of the campaigns to politicize supporters, suggesting flaws in the foundation of the human rights movement. In order to set itself on a path toward relevance and effectiveness, the

movement must inculcate political engagement, maintain an alignment of principle and action, and resist the seductive features of the age of consumerism.

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## **CHAPTER 1 – MOBILIZING THE MASSES FOR THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS**

### **Introduction**

This dissertation traces the emergence of the global human rights movement, investigates the role of popular culture as a vehicle for mobilization, and critically examines why the movement has failed to adequately politicize its supporters in the process. Beginning in the mid-1970s, a broad shift began to take place in which ordinary people were routinely confronted with human suffering, as conflict and crisis assumed a role as ritualized news events. The public response to these phenomena demonstrated a capacity for solidarity and engagement. The inception of a collective ethos of compassion, an awareness of the other based on empathy, can be considered a symptom of globalization, of a moral variety, and is a byproduct of shifting economic trends, advances in technology, and efforts toward transnational organization. Support for human rights advocacy has gained traction as a mainstream social cause and provides a set of principles with which average people mediate the world and their role in it. Yet, this transformation did not occur spontaneously, but rather was deliberately cultivated by a host of activists and movement architects. Over this period, human rights and humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) grew and expanded their operations, largely in response to a series of profound shocks in international affairs: famines, wars, and genocides. However, the methods and strategies deployed to enlist the



public in defense of human rights shaped the substance of their engagement. This dissertation addresses the discrepancy between the political content of advocacy campaigns and failure of the campaigns to politicize supporters, suggesting flaws in the foundation of the human rights movement.

Human rights emerged as a mainstream cause due to its integration with elements of popular culture. Trends in consumer behavior, visual media, and corporate advertising were leveraged by human rights organizations to attract supporters and raise the profile of their issues. While specific expressions of pop culture—celebrity-infused benefit concerts, sensational media coverage, and branded advertising—allowed the movement to expand, they also informed its operations. As will be demonstrated, these venues effectively encourage participation from new cross-sections of the population. Thousands and millions of ordinary people who would have otherwise remained on the sidelines became involved in these campaigns by donating money, attending an event, and calling their elected officials. However, the apolitical nature of this involvement is what lies at the core of this project.

Citizen engagement with global affairs is evidence of the prospects for fostering a collective response to crisis based on compassion and morality. Trends evidence the possibility for engagement drive on cosmopolitanism and solidarity, in which borders matter little and the protection human welfare is of universal concern. It is clear that the possibility exists for human rights to take shape as the basis for a progressive global movement based on principles of equality, autonomy, and dignity and structured to challenge transgressions. Yet, when human rights participation is facilitated by popular culture mechanisms, these tendencies are not translated into meaningful political action.

This passion is prone to produce surges of energy that are plagued by short attention span, capriciousness, and internal inconsistency: crises flare up, outrage and grief fuel a public response, and then audiences once again become deflated and detached. There seems to be no threshold for engagement; no specific death toll or regional specificity that motivates average people to become involved. The uneven outpouring of emotion and protest projects an image of the movement as, at times, meandering schizophrenically, unguided by universal principles or political commitment. To address these tensions, this dissertation presents an historical analysis of the contemporary human rights movement and an evaluation of its effectiveness in addressing global calamity. Still the question remains, can the human rights movement be taken seriously despite its apolitical tendencies, or are these perpetual troublemakers merely a band of gadflies, only superficially committed and therefore able to be co-opted, manipulated and marginalized? I suggest that it is possible to overcome these institutional and fundamental shortcomings, but not without blazing a different path that relies less on popular appeal and more on the political content of human rights challenges.

By forging the association between human rights and pop culture, the lighter side of popular culture has had a negative influence. As modes of popular culture became vehicles for human rights, substance of a severe nature (human rights abuse) was filtered through channels most commonly reserved for entertainment and commercialism. The venues that serve as platforms for human rights mobilization frame crisis and suffering as apolitical matters to be remedied by modest investments and expressions. If outlets of entertainment and commercialism provide contexts in which human rights messages are communicated, then what is the effect on the movement, on its campaigns, and on its

ability to be relevant? Is human rights protection bolstered or harmed through these associations? What is the viability for the human rights movement going forward, should it continue to straddle the line between politicized engagement and levity?

Human rights demand political and politicized responses due to the essential qualities of human rights ideals, principles, and content. By “human rights” I refer to the catalogue of rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights are afforded to all members of the human species and serve to guarantee individuals protections against violations of their autonomy, dignity, and security. Human rights are “political” because they establish a particular relationship between human beings and the political communities in which they are situated. Individuals are rights-bearers and make claims against the state that is the entity primarily responsible for protection and provision of rights. They place limits on state behavior and provide checks against the arbitrary and unjust exercise of power. Individuals are prioritized in political decision making, ahead of other considerations; the well-being of individuals and groups cannot be sacrificed to serve the interests of geopolitics, capital, or other forms of entrenched power.

For these reasons, this dissertation regularly describes human rights engagement as demanding of “political” or “politicized” engagement because the failure to recognize the political dimensions of human rights, I contend, contributes to the weakness and shortcomings of the movement. Human rights organizations operating with these principles and values conduct outreach campaigns and raise awareness of human rights abuse in an attempt to empower both the vulnerable, as well as their advocates. So, on the one hand, organizations provide an anchor for the expression of these political principles,

but also have the need to translate these, at times, abstract ideals to average people and motivate them to become involved in campaigns and events. It is at this juncture that the substance of this dissertation occurs: in order to transmit political ideals to the general public and solicit their support, human rights organizations have chosen to traffic in popular culture. In the process, the political nature of human rights is compromised; therefore failing to politicize those involved in human rights campaigns, in turn affecting their salience. A core challenge for human rights organizations is to construct a bridge between the public and the larger movement, which is why the means by which this is attempted are so crucial. The social aspect of global human rights activism—that relationship between a Western advocate and a suffering stranger—is fraught with deep tensions, yet remains a prevalent bond that constitutes for many a uniquely 21<sup>st</sup> century global experience.

### **Social Relations and Human Rights Movements**

There are discrete forms of human rights engagement that require distinction and, in order to do so, I introduce a dichotomy that captures two prevalent types: *self-determining* and *other-regarding* human rights movements. The former is closely tied to the classic social protest model (that may or may not include a resort to violence): American Revolution, French Revolution, worker's general strikes, anti-imperial national liberation, the Suffragettes, civil rights freedom rides, the Stonewall riots, the 1989 revolutions, and possibly the 2011 Arab Spring. While diverse in their own right, it is important for our current purposes to identify the way in which these movements have all been self-determining. To utilize an Hegelian (1977) understanding of "self-determination," actors in these movements seek to determine for themselves their own

lives through action in the world. This is clearly true of the more technical definition of self-determination, usually reserved for national independence, but is also appropriate for personal, or group-level, determination. The social protest model consists in individuals standing up for themselves, claiming their own rights, and grappling with power. An overriding theme throughout this model is the self-interested initiative, the directness of the engagement, and the willingness to take on risk in the process. This model contrasts with the form of human rights activism that this dissertation takes as its subject.

In addition to self-determining activism, there are also “other-regarding” expressions of activism. Even within the social protest model, evidence of this is clear. Intergroup alliances and defections created diverse communities of supporters throughout many of these movements: anarchists joined with socialists to form the First International (Ishay 2008, 145-6), men advocated for the female franchise, white American Northerners marched down south with black brothers and sisters, and queer-straight alliances help mainstream the drive for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights. There are traces in history when actors are engaged in the struggles of others, in solidarity, without ostensible personal gains to be won, besides moral victories. This trend may be yet another expression of the term “universal” that is inherently tied to human rights discourse—when the plight of a particular group becomes a universalized imperative for groups with no self-interest to flex. The cases and episodes explored in this research project focus mainly on other-regarding human rights movements that have as their referents the suffering of other people in another country. For instance, why do Western television viewers come to care about innocent strangers caught in the crosshairs

of conflict and how do these viewers respond when they experience this feeling of concern?

This analysis attempts to consider the role of *social relations in human rights* and searches for explanations of phenomena of this sort. It has been argued that human rights derive from the “creative praxis of social movements” (Stammers 2009, 9); which is to say our ideas about human rights have evolved due to the actions of protest movements. Traditionally, as mentioned above, these social movements have been self-determining. However, I contend, that other-regarding movements have not only been present throughout the history of human rights, but also must be considered as a foundational component of the contemporary human rights landscape and an important source for ideas about the praxis of rights.

If this is the case, then what can we come to understand through an investigation into the social praxis of other-regarding human rights movements? Historically, this refers to movements such as those opposed to slavery and the slave trade, as well as that surrounding reform of the Congo Free State at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the Congo Reform Movement is more uniquely distinct than abolition because of how removed the issue was from the locale of the activists (which is a remark on geography, as well as on the consciousness of ordinary people in the early 1900s). In the case of abolition, slavery was something occurring in the West—something that could be witnessed first-hand and may even serve the interests of neighbors and fellow nationals. The abuse of Congolese by the Belgian King Leopold II, however, transpired at a distance and is a predecessor to the campaigns and movements common in the twenty-first century.

Ordinary people in Europe and North America began to hear of the atrocities through communiqués and pamphlets from missionaries who visited the Congo Basin. Quite specifically, advocates for reform of the Congo came into contact with the cause through expressions of popular culture, predating those that will be discussed in this dissertation: celebrity, visuality, and publicity. The Congo Reform Association (CRA), the hub of the movement, spearheaded by E.D. Morel and Roger Casement, was aware of the challenge of raising awareness of a vile system operating well out of the view of the Western public (Inter alia Sliwinski 2006, 334). They enlisted the support of two literary titans and venerable celebrities of the day: Mark Twain (a.k.a. Samuel Clemens) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Heerten 2009, 175). Both penned vitriolic responses to King Leopold's crimes, including Twain's *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (2006) written satirically in the King's first person, gained personal access to power brokers, and elevated the profile of the movement.

In addition to the presence of famous people among the ranks of supporters, photography performed an invaluable service. Remarkably, John and Alice Harris, Christian missionaries operating in the Congo, were first to return with graphic imagery of severed hands that had become King Leopold's brutal trademark. These photographs were trafficked widely in print publications, such as books, pamphlets, and newspapers, and also became a key component to a series of traveling lantern shows. Organized largely by missionaries-turned-activists, these live productions featured imagery projected by light shown through stencils. Coupled with fire-and-brimstone preaching and a generous dose of phantasmagoric and macabre spectacles these shows traveled furiously and were performed in front of thousands of audience members at a time

(Sliwinski 2006, 340-2). All in all, the deployment of celebrity and graphic imagery composed the pillars of what was a broad and sophisticated publicity campaign waged by Morel and Casement. While the ultimate effect of the Congo Reform Movement remains the subject of controversy, its legacy resonates in twenty-first century human rights movements (Hochschild 1999, 203). The strategy of the CRA was a deliberate attempt to build a mass base of support for action in the Congo. They were convinced that if enough people learned about the horrific situation, they would be morally compelled to act and to demand a response from their governments. “Among its supporters, it kept alive a tradition, a way of seeing the world, a human capacity for outrage at pain inflicted on another human being, no matter whether that pain is inflicted on someone of another color, in another country, at another end of the earth” (Hochschild 1999, 305). Thus, Morel and Casement set out to reach as many people as possible, through avenues they thought would be most effective in achieving a critical mass and, therefore, they looked to popular culture.

### **Human Rights and Popular Culture: Chapter-by-Chapter Overview**

The chapters of this dissertation are arranged historically and thematically, each designed to describe the global human rights movement at a particular moment and contribute to a fluid, coherent story about the rise of the movement as a whole. Each episode features a particular tactic or method introduced into the human rights toolbox by activist organizations and demonstrates a process of learning over time. Popular culture is the organizing concept within which each of the cases is subsumed, and in each chapter a distinct expression of popular culture is highlighted. Motivating these determinations is an investigation undertaken in each chapter into the forces operating to inform popular



culture and the effect of these forces on the human rights community. As these forces are identified, their influence is detailed through specific human rights campaigns and their consequences are evaluated in terms of policy accomplishments, contribution to the evolution of human rights consciousness, and lasting effect on the movement. The narratives in each chapter are woven through flash points in world politics—wars, famines, disasters, and crises—and anchored by shifts in the economic, political, and technological contexts in which human rights activism takes place.

Chapter 2, “Constituencies of Compassion and Consumerism: Amnesty International, Live Aid, and the Anti-Apartheid Movement,” emphasizes the role of celebrity-laden benefit concerts that first emerged in the late-1970s and grew to become a mass phenomenon in the 1980s. Beginning modestly with theater performances in the United Kingdom, Monty Python’s Flying Circus hosted the earliest events whose proceeds were donated to Amnesty International (AI). Several years later, Sir Bob Geldof, captivated by footage of an Ethiopian famine, was inspired to take action on a grander scale. Geldof, an alumnus of these early AI shows, went on to expand on this model as he executed Live Aid in 1985, a grandiose concert featuring the most famous rock stars of the decade and benefitting famine relief. Finally, the strident Anti-Apartheid Movement followed in the footsteps of its predecessors and made similar use of celebrity, benefit concerts, and cultural products generally, but with a more political and politicized tenor. *Consumer culture* provides the backdrop for this chapter and the tension brought on by the compulsion of mass consumption emblematic of the period: while consumerism possesses an inherent tendency toward self-indulgence and superficiality, human rights organizations sought to channel this commercial energy into ethical behavior. With the

cultural impact of Live Aid and successful outcome in South Africa, a development was underway in which ordinary people shared concern for suffering strangers and demonstrated an ability to act on their behalf.

Chapter 3, “Spectacles of Suffering and Humanitarian Intervention in Somalia and Bosnia,” focuses on *visual media culture* in the aftermath of the Cold War and the interaction between audiences and those individuals suffering on television. Through the crisis in Somalia and the genocide in Bosnia, television viewers were afforded a prime vantage point from which to watch it all happen. Due to advances in satellite communication and the initiation of twenty-four-hour news networks, these human tragedies and acts of unfathomable violence became spectacular events unfolding in real-time. However, throughout these episodes, the audience’s response was uneven, inconsistent, and susceptible to manipulation. There were glimmers of engagement and consciousness amidst waves of detachment and distraction. During the 1990s, it became impossible to defend inaction by virtue of not knowing about the commission of atrocities; a standard refrain in previous eras. Yet, even capturing brutality on tape was insufficient to galvanize the public behind a unified response, leaving in question the capacity of the audience for moral and political solidarity with those suffering on television, at a distance. Lessons learned from these periods suggest that, in considering the process of raising awareness of human rights issues, the medium matters. Therefore, when a movement emerges armed with the force of Madison Avenue, this premise is tested once more.

Chapter 4, “Bumper Sticker Activism and the Corporate Branding of the Save Darfur Movement,” pivots on the use of branded advertising as an outreach tactic for

human rights purposes. *Corporate culture* describes the milieu around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which commercial marketing became a ubiquitous feature of urban landscapes and media platforms. While in business and marketing literature “corporate culture” refers to an internal organizational dynamic, in its current usage this term suggests the external effect of corporations on the social world. When grassroots energies began to mobilize to address the violence in Darfur, in which government-proxy militias were targeting civilians, an organization was founded to confront the conflict and to serve as a permanent institution for genocide prevention. However, the methods used by the Save Darfur Coalition (SDC) to conduct its campaign mimicked the branding strategies of corporations, and produced detrimental effects for the movement. Despite all the fervor surrounding Darfur, the branding strategy was a central cause of the loss of credibility SDC suffered due to their reliance on disputed facts in their advertising. Just as corporations are interested in selling a branded identity and projecting their products as components of that identity, Save Darfur may have gotten lost in their own branding when advertising became an end unto itself, rather than a means to another end.

At the heart of this inquiry is a curiosity about the relationship between average citizens and human rights movements, and the way in which popular culture has been used to bridge the gap and forge a lasting association. These categories of culture are not static and, as will be evidenced, are frequently reproduced and actually overlap one chapter to the next. For instance, there are heavily visual elements in the anti-famine campaign in the 1980s, and the Save Darfur movement trafficked in celebrities and mass events. Yet, I do hope to distill each of these pop culture strategies within the period in which they emerged and matured. Interestingly, as these methods are instantiated and

institutionalized, they become components of an evolving model of advocacy that organizations deploy when confronted with crisis. This is as true in violent conflict, as it is in natural disaster. Relief agencies and activist groups appeal to popular culture to attract ordinary people to their cause and solicit donations or petition signatures. On the one hand, this is a decidedly reasonable approach to campaigning because popular culture provides a familiar vehicle with which to reach an enormous number of people. However, the tendency in popular culture is not toward politicization, but commercialism. To unpack this tension, each episode will make reference to three critically illuminating indicators: *motivation* of the activists; *expression* of the form of activism; and *commitment* of activists to resolution of the problem.

“Motivations” refer to underlying forces that compel participation in these most unusual public happenings—and it is the case that these activities should be thought of as unusual. It is bizarre, in a sense, for average Western audience members to experience an awakening as to the plight of strangers in another country and feel a compulsion to do something to help alleviate suffering. It is simply not something that has ever been a regular or sustained component of social life. Individuals naturally feel affinity with those within their communities, but concern for Ethiopians, Somalis, or Bosnians has historically been experienced by Ethiopians, Somalis, and Bosnians respectively. So, a persistent question throughout the dissertation is, “Why?” Why do people take it upon themselves to act in ways that do not necessarily serve their narrow self-interest? What motivates people to join these campaigns, donate money, or attend a rally? While it may be the case that a \$10 donation is a \$10 donation no matter what the reason, identifying participants’ motivations is crucial to understanding the human rights consciousness that

I suggest is developing and useful for the purpose of channeling specific motivations toward political ends. A driving impetus of this project is the way in which popular cultural mechanisms are used to mobilize ordinary people to participate in extraordinary campaigns. The role of emotional, moral, social, and political motivations will return throughout each episode and will help explain the expressions of human rights generated at each moment.

“Expression” refers to the form and substance of the campaigns that are produced through the use of popular culture. What do these kinds of human rights campaigns look like? What do they consist of? How are they perceived? Keeping in mind the discussion above about self-determining versus other-regarding movements, the latter will contain elements of the former, but must also design a new set of devices. These devices will reflect the motivations of those involved and attempt to capitalize off spurts of public energy. Through a combination of traditional methods, such as direct action and letter-writing, and creative new platforms such as those linked to emergent technologies and social media, the manifestations of these campaigns are often diverse and multi-faceted. The demands made by human rights movements are concrete expressions of these campaigns. Finally, and somewhat more amorphously, the perception of human rights in the eyes and minds of the world is a component of this picture as well; and this bears consideration specifically in the context of commercialism. When the association is made between human rights and popular culture, is the expression sufficiently serious and political to carry the weight of its demands? Are there negative impressions being made that simultaneously imply a lack of credibility and competence? The answers to these

questions suggest one ingredient on which success of a campaign may hinge, while yet another is the commitment of the activists to the issue at hand.

“Commitment” is a key factor in this discussion because it ultimately determines the viability and salience of the norms the movement purports to embody. Once ordinary people have been motivated to become involved, what is asked of them, how do they respond, and for how long? Historically, in reference to self-determining movements, commitment is a product of the ability of individuals to withstand violence, simply put. When human rights movements are waged as challenges to arbitrary power through methods of direct action, the durability and fortitude of the participants in the face of brutal crackdowns dictates how long the campaign will last. The self-sacrifice of activists decides the duration of the enterprise, as do ancillary concerns about resources, broadly conceived. However, when the object of this question is an other-regarding movement, the issue of commitment is more elusive. Since human rights interventions in these cases are executed at a distance, there are potentially lower costs involved in participation: a letter-writer in the United Kingdom does not risk the harm of the baton or the billy club. Yet, a cost-benefit analysis cannot account for the kinds of inputs that will be explored in the chapters that follow: short attention span, fatigue, and distraction. If these factors are included as intervening variables, the calculus becomes less clear-cut, but hopefully more explanatorily satisfying. With these considerations, media, technology and culture figure heavily and simplistic issues of cost-benefit and self-interest fall away.

Therefore, one central objective of this project is to *describe* the motivations, expressions, and commitments of the global human rights movement and its participants. However, there is also a decidedly *normative* project underway that revolves around the

practice of human rights activism: Do these strategies and these models provide effective tools with which to defend human dignity and welfare? Is the human rights movement more resolute and more relevant as a result of these methods? Are human rights norms appropriately reflected in and represented by the advocates that speak in their name? By investigating, in depth, the actors, organizations, and events that constitute the human rights movement through various snapshots of recent world affairs, conclusions can be gleaned as to how well their goals are being met.

The final chapter synthesizes the cases in light of these questions and evaluates the effects of consumerism, spectacle, and branding in the context of contemporary controversies in human rights. That the human rights movement fails to politicize its supporters may be an unintended consequence of the strategies it employs, but what alternatives exist? What other manifestations of global human rights activism can be reasonably expected? By bringing back the other-self dichotomy introduced above, Chapter 5 further dissects the concept of politicization and identifies elements of politicized engagement. Ultimately, an agenda of this project is to determine the possibility for the emergence of a politicized constituency of human rights advocates concerned for the rights of others. Because this is constituted by a one-off relationship, the classic social protest model cannot be simply duplicated, which means that a third way must be discovered that transcends the dialectic and bridges the gap between solidarity and charity. This dissertation is a critical exploration of the human rights movement and offers a descriptive account of its emergence, as well as proposes a normative framework with which to approach questions of strategies and objectives.

## **Conclusion**

If successful, this dissertation will help provide guidance on some of the bevy of questions presented in this introduction. At least, this project presents a narrative detailing the emergence of global human rights activism, the events that serve as signposts, and the organizations that constitute this broad and diverse movement. The episodes in each chapter are compelling in and of themselves, and in the aggregate compose a story that represents a critical, new look at the contemporary global landscape. It is a subject familiar to most, because these strategies continue to frame the way we think about human rights and humanitarianism. Investigating the forces and influences that give credence to these advocacy methods tell us a great deal about the organizations whose actions these are, as they do about ourselves as audience members.

If the critical questions are ignored, the core of this narrative describes the significant pressures facing non-governmental organizations in the twenty-first century. The market for donor funding, media coverage, and grassroots support is inherently limited and, therefore, enormously competitive. News outlets, philanthropic foundations, and other civil society actors are constrained by their own set of resources and must make difficult decisions in an environment with no shortage of demands. Priorities and preferences are set through a complicated process of wrangling, negotiating, and ultimately compromise. Despite the utopian and uncompromising nature of human rights norms, the reality of the world is that non-profit managers are forced to arrive at policies for their organizations, which necessarily entails sacrificing the optimal for the best possible, hopefully without allowing “the perfect to be enemy of the good.” This



dissertation focuses in on the space where the ideal and the practical, the noumenal and the phenomenal, collide.

To reiterate the thesis, human rights emerged as a mainstream cause through its integration with expressions of popular culture: consumerism, visual media, and advertising. While these channels allowed the movement to expand, they also shaped the movement. Scholars and journalists have tried to make sense of successes and failures in this relatively brief history of global human rights activism. In the process, certain mantras have developed through the movement's learned experience with crisis and conflict. As the chapters describe, three foundational maxims emerged, each from a distinct time period: mobilize masses, expose abuse, and make noise. To mobilize masses of supporters is to flex the power of numbers. To expose abuse is to be a witness, as well as to lay bear the power of shame. To make noise is to attempt to motivate political will among resistant policymakers. These lessons emerge from hard fought campaigns and, more often than not, from shortcomings and failures in the face of brutality and catastrophe. The human rights movement is engaged in a process of learning, yet, this dissertation contends, it has not learned all the right lessons. Human rights mantra may provide necessary indicators of an effective movement, but the sufficient balance has yet to be struck. The research that follows tests these mantras in practice and assesses the future of the movement.

## **CHAPTER 2 – CONSTITUENCIES OF COMPASSION AND CONSUMERISM: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, LIVE AID, AND THE ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT**

*“...a populist, non-governmental constituency...A constituency of compassion” – Sir Bob Geldof (1986, 250)*

*“...this analysis views Bob Geldof as a kind of hapless hip Jerry Lewis who takes up starving Africans as his ‘kids’ and holds the biggest telethon in history” – TV Reed (2001, 101)*

### **Introduction**

The model of human rights advocacy developed in the 1980s began under modest circumstances, but evolved into a series of phenomena that set human rights on a course for mass appeal. As celebrities became involved in activist campaigns through their performances at benefit concerts, human rights emerged as a mainstream social cause in which average citizens participated. From a twenty-first century perspective, however, it is commonplace for actors and rock stars to lend their fame to human rights campaigns on behalf of Ugandan street children, Afghan women, Tibetan exiles, New Orleans refugees, or Haitian earthquake victims. Celebrities are useful spokespersons when it comes to raising awareness and raising money because of the way in which the audience perceives these familiar faces and voices. This familiarity allows for unfamiliar issues to be brought into focus. Ostensibly, celebrities that engage in human rights and humanitarian campaigns are genuine about their ethical and political commitments. As

performers at benefit concerts, goodwill ambassadors, telethon phone bank operators, and editorial contributors, popular cultural figures have come to occupy a central position in human rights—especially with respect to communicating a message to the previously uninformed and unconcerned spectator. The possibility that popular culture can provide a platform for ordinary people to become aware of and involved in human rights is, at first glance, a decidedly positive feature of the contemporary landscape. If scholars and activists take seriously the desire to inculcate a “human rights culture,” the ability to reach out to new communities of supporters is essential. However, the question addressed in this chapter is whether the message communicated through celebrities and popular culture can be of a political nature that advances human rights norms, overcoming the commercial tendencies of these platforms.

Recent examples illustrate that the employment of celebrities in campaigns for disaster relief or humanitarian aid can have profound effects. Masses of audience members respond with charitable donations and letters to elected officials at the behest of the famous advocate. The ability to rouse the consciousness of the general public and place a dire issue on the agenda is powerful. Celebrities provide credibility to foreign issues and concentrate attention on problems that might otherwise go unnoticed in a sea of confusing crises. By a range of metrics—dollars raised, membership figures, or intensity of public outcry—the role played by popular cultural figures has helped elevate the profile of human rights to the ranks of other mainstream liberal causes, such as environmentalism or the treatment of animals.

While celebrities have lent their fame to many diverse causes in the past, the period discussed in this chapter (1975-1990) signals the institutionalization of the use of

the *celebrity-infused benefit concert* by human rights organizations. Recruitment, advocacy and fund-raising strategies were developed in this period to sustain a burgeoning movement and advance its causes effectively among wider swaths of the population. Celebrity appearances at benefit concerts provided the vehicle for accomplishing such a set of objectives and quickly rose to prominence as a key indicator of a cause's public salience and viability. These types of events were not new per se, but their routinization during the 1980s introduces new avenues for popular participation in human rights campaigns, as well as provokes a range of new questions.

The initiation of these mass cultural events fundamentally transformed activism, as movement architects sought to expand the base of human rights supporters within the mainstream of Western societies. Human rights in the late-twentieth century was associated with two central threads: grassroots struggles for self-determination, women's liberation, and equality for blacks in the US on the one hand, and in the context of international legal battles waged in courts by trained jurists, on the other. Therefore, while a range of actors were involved in human rights in the period since the drafting of the Universal Declaration, there was largely a divide between the radical flank engaged in direct action and those who take up the bureaucratic, legalistic approach. Yet, in the waning years of the Cold War, human rights was guided along a mainstream path and it became common to participate in activism without either being a member of an oppressed group or an international lawyer. With an expanding pool of affluent observers from which to draw support, human rights organizations situated themselves as relevant actors in the new global civil society. The mainstreaming of human rights signified the

potential for masses of people to be invested and involved in the defense of human dignity, in a sustained capacity as part of a larger movement.

However, the means through which ordinary people became involved in human rights campaigns is the critical subject of this discussion. As will be detailed below, due to standard financial pressures associated with operating a growing organization, the human rights movement was driven to commercialization early on. In order to generate operations resources, organizations turned to popular cultural figures and their talents to attract donors. As well, organizations began to sell products to bring in money: concert tickets, t-shirts, posters, videos, and albums. Merchandising serves an obvious purpose, but also presents human rights protection in a new light, framing the ethical imperative to help the vulnerable as sufficiently fulfilled through shopping. As human rights and humanitarian organizations utilized various types of commercial exchange—membership dues, commodity consumption, divestment/boycott—a linkage was forged during this era between spending money and the alleviation of suffering. A model for human rights campaigns emerged during these years that relied on consumerism and popular culture for the development of a donor-base and a standing constituency of advocates. These mechanisms in turn influence the methods human rights organizations deploy in practice, and these practical concerns will have consequences that demonstrate both the opportunities presented by the market, as well as its dangerous pitfalls.

The episodes presented below offer examples of commercialized activism that awakened the consciousness of new participants and provided formal channels for a mass audience to connect themselves to human rights. The first snapshot captures Amnesty International (AI) in its formative years and describes the simple events that laid the

foundation for the strategic model that followed. While AI is the pre-eminent example of the membership-based organization, the payment of dues by supporters was supplemented by charitable giving at benefit events. This trend continues with the Ethiopian famine alleviation campaigns of Live Aid and “We Are the World,” both of which are solely donor-based and result in the height of frivolous humanitarian consumerism. Finally, the anti-Apartheid movement idealizes the potential for an effective human rights campaign in its utilization of divestment and boycotts, two forms of consumption dependent on the consciousness and empowerment of the consumer.

To frame the pitfalls specifically, I focus on the costs associated with popular culture and commercialization through appeal to critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. For Theodor Adorno, popular culture is a homogenizing force that operates as an extension of late-capitalism. The “culture industry” is that which is now responsible for the production of music, film, and literature to be sold to the masses as a commodity—instead of for its aesthetic merits, or political content. Herbert Marcuse, similarly, describes popular culture as a consequence of the society of mass consumption that arose in the West following the Second World War. “One-dimensionality” is the product of the cultural environment that conditions assimilation and compliance. The critical perspective has been absorbed into dominant modes of living; culture has become an arena for alienation and repression, rather than for emancipation and radicalism. In terms of human rights, this style of critique is salient with respect to the political content of campaigns. If the integration of the culture industry with human rights contributes to its one-dimensionality, then we should see a draining of politics from the movement. A

human rights movement devoid of politics may see successes in its mass appeal, but risks relegation and irrelevance.

This period proves to be formative in setting the trajectory of human rights activism and the diffusion of a consciousness surrounding solidarity with suffering strangers. Yet, the 1980s is an era defined by excess and luxury, calling into question the viability of a political movement filtered through trends of mass consumption. In fact, for most people, this decade was less about limousines and Wall Street and more about stagnant wages and unemployment. Therefore, in the cultural milieu that exalts wealth in the context of tough times, the rise of personal credit acts as a substitute that permits mass consumption at one's own steep expense. Human rights campaigns are designed to capitalize on the momentum in the marketplace toward consumerism by integrating popular culture in the form of celebrities and benefit concert events. The consequences of these campaigns demonstrate whether the superficial features of commercialism influence human rights, or if these ethical movements are able to channel market forces in the service of human dignity.

At stake throughout this chapter is the perception of the political content of human rights in the eyes of the audience. In the expressions of each of the campaigns, a debate is underway that balances the softer dictates of a charitable cause and the harder political edge of a human rights movement. With the injection of commercial elements as tools in global movements, the seductive side of the marketplace—that side occupied by consumerism—has the potential to affect the substance of the movements and shape the association participants share of human rights and humanitarianism. The conclusions drawn from these three vignettes suggest that, ultimately, the strategic model that

combines popular culture and mass consumption has the potential to produce either an effective solidarity movement, or an atomized hoard of consumers masquerading as activists. Consequences depend on the relationship between the motivations of individuals and the expressions of their participation, as form shapes content. Popular culture, while effective as a means for raising funds and awareness, can also forge a consciousness based around apolitical, and, indeed, depoliticized mass consumption. Instead of committing themselves to the protection of the dignity of others, supporters merely seek their own satisfaction—self-indulgence cloaked in empathy. However, when the proper mechanisms are utilized, market-based venues for activism can produce an empowered grassroots movement with significant international strength. The context for these events is a decade fraught with contradiction, but provides explanatory power as to how the consumerism was put to work for human rights.

### **The Socio-Political Economy of Mass Culture**

#### **Personal Finance, the Yuppie, and the Consumer Class**

The emergence of affluence and mass consumption in the 1980s is set against the backdrop of the economic instability of the prior decade. The 1970s were a period of perpetual crisis and societal despair, highlighted by oil spikes, inflation, and a general transformation of the economic landscape. The Third World was industrializing and inviting foreign direct investment away from the West. As early as “1970[,] manufacturing firms were making about 25 percent of their new investment overseas” (Schwartz 2000, 200). This trend continued when the cartel known as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, began to exert control over flows of oil and money—especially in response to flare ups in conflict between Arab states and Israel



during the decade. Western economic preponderance was slipping away and the balance of power was shifting. Growth slowed down dramatically. Recession ensued. Volatility in the energy market, coupled with the adaptations made by industrial nations to deal with floating exchange rates and a weak dollar, shaped the 1970s into a period of “anxiety, fear for the future—in short, crisis” (Beaud 2001, 232).

However, in the 1980s, US markets would tourniquet their wounds and generate positive flows by opening investment to individuals. With the deregulation of finance in 1975, the exchange of stocks moved from fixed commission rates to competitive commission rates and initiated the personalization of finance with discount brokerage firms (Nocera 1994, 106-107). “Deregulation of financial services was oriented toward creating a consumer rather than business face for stock ownership” (Martin 2002, 23). Money market funds, first devised in the late-1960s, were the vehicle for introducing middle-class consumers to the stock market as a mechanism for “saving” money; traditionally reliable dividends were perceived as interest returned on principal from a high yield savings account. Inflation compelled this move because as the value of money fell, actual savings accounts (regulated by federal rates) fell. “A blurring had begun between saving and investing” (Nocera 1994, 83). Because money market funds were not backed by the Federal Reserve, they were resistant to inflation. While returns were higher in the market than in savings, consumers kept their money in these funds and became accustomed to moving money back and forth according to changes in interest rates (Nocera 1994, 83). Money market managers profitted by establishing these funds and charging transaction fees to users. Personal finance extended beyond the savings account and investment was no longer exclusively for big business. What started as a mechanism

for individuals to sidestep the pitfalls of inflation accounted for \$400 billion in investment by 1991; this “was the first truly different wrinkle in personal finance since the credit card” and would facilitate change in “the financial habits of the middle class” (Nocera 1994, 75). Personal debt, in the form of credit cards and home mortgages, would accelerate this trend throughout the decade as a reflection of the imperative for consumption that defined the 1980s.

The presumed profitability of money market funds, however, would be juxtaposed with an unprecedented accumulation of debt that “turned ‘the eighties’ into a term of opprobrium” (Nocera 1994, 297). Accessibility of personal lines of credit ushered in and perpetuated consumption for the sake of it. By all measures, debt skyrocketed during the decade and by 1987 the upward trend peaked as total consumer debt had doubled, revolving credit card balances tripled, home equity loans amounted to \$80 billion of new debt annually, and the ratio of debt payment to disposable income per household was 25 percent (Nocera 1994, 297). Specifically, credit cards were a central driver of this trend. “By 1984, 71 percent of all Americans between seventeen and sixty-five carried a credit card” (Nocera 1994, 301). The blurring that had begun with money market funds had been transferred to the notion of credit and debt as a normal component of one’s financial portfolio—as if the money one is allowed to borrow from a lender was real earned money that consumers were entitled to. In actuality, credit provides a false sense of purchasing power that plays into the hands of the financiers at the expense of the borrower. Personal finance in the 1980s took the form of market investment and debt and replaced the 1970s mindset of austerity, saving, and desert. Instead, individuals consumed beyond their class and beyond their means, in such a way that has been characterized as “a betrayal of

traditional middle-class values” and “a wholesale surrender to the priorities of profit and the pleasures of consumerism” (Ehrenreich 1989, 200).

Beyond the pleasurable benefit of purchasing material goods, consumerism is embedded with social meaning. Finance and banking during this period personified the upper crust of society because of the way in which it had emerged as the pre-eminent growth sector. Those employed in this area benefited quickly and directly from changes in the economy. The credit card industry had become the “most profitable activity in all of banking” (Nocera 1994, 302) and “by 1985, close to 8 million Americans...were using them to ring up close to \$8 billion in charges” (Nocera 1994, 303). As finance charges and overdraft fees flooded in, lenders—the companies, their boards of trustees, and their shareholders—reaped enormous profits. This was true in investment as well, as the Gordon Gekkos of the world rose to prominence as leaders of industry because the period produced real-life Gekkos as well, such as Donald Trump and T. Boone Pickens. The persona of Michael Douglas’s character in the film *Wall Street* (1987) was a caricature of the age, but not a fiction. Wealth inequalities were widening and class distinctions continuing to erode. Penthouse apartments, chauffeur-driven limousine rides to work, and thousand-dollar suits were projected in a normative fashion as an ideal that everyone should strive for. And, for some, it was a reality. “In Wall Street’s bustling money factories, the goal of amassing a million by age thirty was neither uncommon nor entirely unrealistic. Baby high-rollers were proliferating, and New York’s \$50-a-lunch restaurants were jammed, by the late eighties, with fresh-faced young people barely above the drinking age” (Ehrenreich 1989, 212).

These “baby high-rollers” were also known colloquially by another name: yuppies. When *Newsweek* declared 1985 to be “The Year of the Yuppie,” its editors were commenting (not unfavorably) on the compulsion toward mass consumption driven by these upper class elites (Adler et al. 1984). Derived from the term “young, urban professionals,” the yuppie was also related to the “yippie” or members of the Youth International Party, a radical social group from the late-1960s. There was a sense in which the 1960s, baby boomer generation had grown up and grown out of its youthful indiscretion in favor of a mature profit-oriented outlook. Their resolve remains the same: the capacity of this generation to change the course of war, or of society by their own will. They are confident, optimistic, and undeterred by what seem like structural obstacles—be they racial discrimination or a traditional middle-class value system. The political constitution of the baby boomers is called upon by the human rights campaigns of the period, in the rallying cries of the against issues like famine and Apartheid.

But, beyond this, yuppies are renowned for their consumption: of European cars, vacation, condos in a gentrified neighborhood, running shoes, gym memberships, and *crème fraiche* (Adler et al. 1984). The more exotic, the more expensive, the less like their parents, the better. A thread through yuppie consumption is the predilection for leisure and luxury. With more money than one needs, especially if a man was one half of a two-income family (a relatively recent trend), “the importance of status-motivated consumption increased significantly”:

A new kind of consumer had emerged for whom consumption itself came to play a central role in constructing new senses of identity based on and around the possession of status-conferring goods. Traditional concepts of social class based on education and occupation were breaking down... ‘Lifestyle’ grew in importance as an indicator of social group

membership, and these group identities, freed from the old restrictions imposed by social class and fixed status groups, were secured by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption.” (Mason 1998, 130)

The affluent, comfortable classes embodied the mantra of excess in consumption that epitomized the 1980s as “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” became required viewing for all. “As the baby boom matured, spending on entertainment and recreation grew rapidly... With most of Americans’ basic needs met, they have devoted an increasing share of their spending to having fun” (Russell 1993, 66). To be sure, yuppies were not a majority of the population and were likely only about 5 percent of their generation (Ehrenreich 1989, 198). However, the crucial point in this discussion is the influence and the impact that the objectification of the yuppie as the ideal has on lower classes. The contradiction of working people striving to obtain the lifestyle of the yuppies in a sluggish economic environment is fraught with the tensions of the era.

Yet, as the upper classes relished the good life of “champagne dreams and caviar wishes,” the other 95 percent suffered under stagnating wages, high unemployment, and aggressive attacks on organized labor. Reaganism and Thatcherism enacted tax cuts for the rich, which resulted in public spending cutbacks that disproportionately affected lower classes. “Marginal rates on the very rich were reduced from a partly nominal 70 percent to 50 percent in 1981; then with tax reform the rate on the richest fell to 28 percent in 1986” (Galbraith 1992, 27). Meanwhile, “the number of Americans living below the poverty line increased by 28 percent in just ten years, from 24.5 million in 1978 to 32 million in 1988” (Galbraith 1992, 107). In the midst of recession, with the gap between rich and poor continuing to widen, those on the bottom looked upwards for inspiration and Gordon Gekko smiled smugly right back at them.

Rising debt from home equity loans and revolving credit card balances were tools that working people utilized to attain a measure of the yuppie lifestyle, even if it was perpetually out of reach. Working extra hours, taking an additional mortgage on the house, and applying for another line of credit might secure a new home stereo system, but it would also set one further back—like struggling in a pool of quick sand. The cultural hegemony of consumerism projected by the yuppie against the reality of the working and middle classes shaped the needs and desires of those worse off. This is so much the case that, not only were the goods and services that credit cards could help one obtain a measure of status, but the medium itself was culturally transformed.

Credit cards were a status symbol. Credit cards were temptation incarnate. Credit cards could get you access to things that were otherwise out of reach. Credit cards could ruin your life. Credit cards could bring great joy. Credit cards could bring enormous misery. Of all the symbols of the American consumer society, credit cards had a hold on the subconscious that was matched—in a completely different way only by the automobile. (Nocera 1994, 300)

This final comment is especially appropriate, in terms of the comparison of the 1980s to the original era of mass consumption in the 1950s, when the automobile was introduced to the middle-class demographic for the first time. Mass consumption and the affluent lifestyle never went away, but did suffer setbacks during the 1970s wave of economic crisis. When, in the 1980s, with the revolutions in personal finance underway, a broader swath of the population gets swept up in the “joys” of consumerism that cloud self-consciousness and affect all areas of society, from leisure and family life to labor and political activism. Thus, the emergence of a human rights movement with mass appeal is mired in a cultural environment rife with mass consumption, making market-based platforms for activism worthy of critique.

## Mass Consumption and One-Dimensionality

Questions associated with mass culture and mass consumption first arise as a response to the affluence in the United States following World War II. Suburban sprawl and Madison Avenue dominated society and perpetuated the blurring of class lines. With the integration of working class demands into postwar social welfare arrangements and the continued disintegration of organized labor generally, lower classes became alienated from their status in society. The expanding middle and upper classes projected their lifestyles downward, influencing the desires of working people. For Herbert Marcuse, for instance, this transition was not coincidental because of the way in which it serves the interests of capital:

Here the so-called equalization of class distinctions reveals its ideological function. If the worker and his boss enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places, if the typist is as attractively made up as the daughter of her employer, if the Negro owns a Cadillac, if they all read the same newspaper, then this assimilation indicates not the disappearance of classes, but the extent to which the needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population. (Marcuse 1964, 8)

The crucial point in this analysis is the change in the composition of society and its effect on the psychology of those that are getting left behind. In Gramscian terms, the “hegemony” of upper class ideologies about consumption and the good life are personified as those values that should be held by all, despite the fact that they fly in the face of the realization of the self and emancipation from the grips of industrial capital. For Marcuse, this is manifested in commodity consumption. The more one owns, the “better” one is, the freer one is. Freedom is exercised by the choices one makes in the marketplace, without regard for the relations of production. This compulsion for

consumerism is a form of social control that permeates the lower classes at their own expense and the deeper consumers buy into this mantra, the further from actualization they become.

But for Marcuse, this is not simply a story about luxury automobiles and vacation resorts because of the way that mass consumption affects politics. As the traditional torchbearers of progressive politics, to the extent the working class and the Left more broadly are absorbed by the society of mass consumption, radical politics are rendered impotent. As diverse interests from throughout society converge on the market, a collapsing effect ripples outward. Consumers are submerged by the notion that any problem can be alleviated through the purchase of goods and services, thereby making it unnecessary to *politically* challenge power structures, be they capital or otherwise. The misery and pain of daily life can be ignored when consumers are pacified by the newest home entertainment system or blockbuster action film. Radical challenges to the status quo are quashed and the society of mass consumption becomes ultimately one-dimensional—that is, devoid of nonconformist perspectives. “And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that the satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to think, feel, and imagine for themselves?” (Marcuse 1964, 50). One-dimensionality is the collapse of multiple perspectives: the mainstream and those that project alternative visions for society.

Yet, the society of mass consumption was not confined to the economic and political realms. The cultural realm was invaded as well through the mechanism of the “culture industry.” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer are the pioneers of this area of critical theory for their insights into the encroachment of the forces of production into



culture. For them, this advancement is the logical progression of the system of capitalism that had successfully colonized labor and now was extending its control over non-work, or leisure time. The culture industry is the expression of the social control being exercised over consumers in their free time. “The effectiveness of the culture industry depends not on its parading an ideology, on disguising the true nature of things, but in removing the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo” (Adorno 1991, 11). At stake in this analysis is the effect of culture on critical thought, on the ability of the audience to seek self-consciousness. The claim, emphasized most clearly by Marcuse, entails the numbing of the general public and the stifling of radical political perspectives by cultural hegemony: “there is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the ‘good’ life. This is the rational and material ground for the unification of opposites, for one-dimensional political behavior. On this ground, the transcending political forces *within* society are arrested, and qualitative change appears possible only as a change from *without*” (Marcuse 1964, 49). Mass cultural production masks class conflict and obscures contradictions in social life that could generate revolutionary activity. Instead, the viewer and listener are placated by feelings of satisfaction, happiness, and freedom that the consumption of popular culture falsely suggests.

Popular music, as one product of the culture industry, is particularly engineered for ensuring passivity among its audience due to the standardization with which it is produced, mirroring the routinization and mechanization inherent in industrial capitalism. Adorno describes this phenomenon as an expression of the “fetish character in music.” Hit songs are designed for “regressive listening” that “appears as soon as advertising

turns into terror, as soon as nothing is left for the consciousness but to capitulate before the superior power of the advertised stuff and purchase spiritual peace by making the imposed goods literally its own thing” (Adorno 1991, 47-48). This cultural form sells an image, an individuality, that it in reality suffocates. It is the illusion of free choice in the cultural marketplace that consumers succumb to in their search for personal expression. “[T]he official culture’s pretence of individualism...necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual...The identical character of the goods which everyone must buy hides itself behind the rigor of the universally compulsory style” (Adorno 1991, 40). Instead of fulfilling the emotional desire to seek out and experience art, popular music is force fed to the consumer. The culture industry treats consumers like children, and perpetuates regressive cultural behavior with the rhythmic structure of the songs, as well as through the production process and manner of delivery (Barber 2007).

Describing mass culture as “pre-digested,” Adorno evokes imagery of a mother bird ingesting, masticating, and regurgitating food for her young (Adorno 1994, 210). The young bird is the recipient of nourishing substance, but is not involved in the process of discovery, procurement, or even natural biological functions like chewing and swallowing. Passive, the consumer of mass culture falsely associates spending with the exercise of individuality and audience membership with political engagement. Therefore, what sense can we make of “charity rock” events or those popular cultural products that support human rights campaigns? If Adorno is correct, then this represents the successful commodification of human rights activism by profit-seeking firms, accomplished through the manipulation of average people. Mass culture may not be the appropriate venue for human rights campaigns because of the deep, paralyzing disconnect between form and

content, substance and essence. As Adorno writes, “Those who ask for a song of social significance ask for it through a medium which deprives it of social significance” (Adorno 1994, 212). It is difficult, if not impossible, in this context, to execute politically motivated campaigns without running the risk of dilution, perversion, or outright co-optation. The 1980s was a decade particularly ripe for mass culture and mass consumption due to changes in class structure, capital accumulation, and social values, and presents a questionable context for the execution of political human rights campaigns.

### **Financial Demands and the Initiation of the Pop Culture Model**

#### **Growth amidst Uncertainty**

Amnesty International’s genesis story is nearing the status of fabled legend: In 1961, Peter Benenson writes an opinion piece in the *Observer* entitled “The Forgotten Prisoners” that detailed the plight of Portuguese students who had been arrested and imprisoned for toasting to freedom. Much has been said of the organization’s evolution, the expansion of its mandate, and its role as international “norm entrepreneur” (see Larsen 1979; Clark 2001; Jonathan Power 2001; Hopgood 2006). From its humble beginnings in a barrister’s office in London, to its ascent as the face of the global human rights movement, Amnesty has undergone an amazing transformation in under fifty years. Yet, the 1970s was a proper moment of maturation for the still-young non-governmental organization (NGO). Every year during the decade witnessed rapid growth by all indications. From 1969-1976, membership experienced a six-fold explosion, rising from 15,000 to 97,000, and the organization’s annual budget expanded by over 1300

percent from approximately \$43,000 to over \$579,000.<sup>1</sup> This correlation demonstrates how AI's central administrative body, the International Secretariat (IS), was forced to develop its capacities to keep up pace with demand.

These pressures are magnified because of the fact that the organization is set-up in a simultaneously centralized and de-centralized fashion: the production of profiles of the Prisoners of Conscience (POCs) is left to the IS and its research wing, while letter writing and the work of getting Prisoners freed is reserved to local chapters that adopt particular cases on which to focus. Thus, the greater the number of chapters, the greater the demand on the IS to support them with reliable information and campaigns behind which to place their efforts. This tension must be emphasized because growth of this magnitude becomes a difficult thing to manage; yet it is in the best interest of the movement, and the Prisoners, to maintain growth at all costs.

However, the strain on resources was tremendous, due not only to the increasing demand on research, but also due to the global recession during these tough years. Financially, similar to the division of labor, AI is also arranged through a mixture of central and de-central relations. National sections are responsible for funding an overwhelming percentage of the IS budget through the direct contribution of its membership dues, while the central body is also involved in generating funds through soliciting donation and sales of its publications. Furthermore, membership dues ranged widely based on the economic wherewithal of the national sections, their local chapters, and the individuals themselves. Nobody was excluded from membership due to lack of payment and the levels of contribution were flexible. Therefore, when oil crises struck

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<sup>1</sup> Based on this author's calculations from data in AI Annual Reports.

particularly hard or inflation rose dramatically, both of which happened throughout the 1970s, individual contributions were inconsistent.

Trepidations about the balance between growth and capital, between the impulse toward expansion and the financial realities inherent in expansion, were expressed annually in the Treasurer's Report. While it is presumably the role of the financial officer to voice caution and advocate for incrementalism, the tone of each subsequent year's report communicates a genuine concern for the future viability of an organization growing at such an accelerated pace. Kevin T. White, in his Treasurer's Report of 1974, articulates this concern clearly:

...as the need for AI's work grows, a melancholy fact that is all too evident, there will be continuous calls for the expansion of the organization.

In our desire to meet every call, we should be conscious of the fact that we cannot immediately rectify all the ills of the world, that our resources are limited and that we may have to consider whether it is better to concentrate on doing effectively within our resources what we can do in a limited field, rather than spread our efforts too thinly over a broad front that we risk effectively accomplishing too little for too many...we may only be building up an expensive machine costing too much to service...(Amnesty International 1974a, 151)

The risk confronting the organization, of folding under its own weight, was a real one that was revisited in White's 1976 Report.

Some of the arguments in favor of expanding present activities and taking on extra activities are seductive. But succumbing to these pressures would either result in partial suspension of the work AI was founded to perform under its statute (...), or in having to increase our budget substantially to enable us to continue our normal activities while taking on new tasks.

I suggest that the time has come to consider how big do we want this organization to grow and whether substantial growth in the International Secretariat will result in greater effectiveness and achievements. In my view it is essential that we do not allow ourselves to be blindly borne

along on a wave of enthusiasm without fully considering and appreciating the consequences. (Amnesty International 1976, 206)

At stake in this debate was the reputation AI had worked so hard to establish—of its reliable effectiveness—and the future mission of the organization.

The question of mission has always been a crucial one for Amnesty, which had traditionally framed itself with a limited purview. Originally cast as a protector of freedom of opinion and religion (and defender of “Prisoners of Conscience”), AI expanded its scope to focus on torture and the death penalty; these two particular violations grew out of in-country reporting in 1970s flash points like Uruguay, Argentina, the Soviet Union, Chile, Iran, and Iraq. While these three pillars—Prisoners of Conscience, torture, and execution—are commonly grouped together under the heading of political and civil rights, even AI’s conception of this category is limited. There was little work done in the areas of self-determination, gender equality, slavery, privacy, family, children, or voting, each of which is guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, Articles 1, 3, 8, 17, 23, 24 and 25, respectively). Arbitrary arrest and detention, AI’s initial cause, remained central to the organization’s work, yet lesser violations of due process were not given much attention. Instead, a more useful typology to describe the kind of work Amnesty was involved in can be labeled as “security rights,” or rights protective of physical integrity (Shue 1980; Milner, Poe, and Leblang 1999).

This mention is not intended for the purpose of maligning Amnesty for its lack of attention to important violations, or even to cite it for inconsistency; rather it is to circumscribe the narrow focus with which the seminal human rights organization has

always operated. This much is emphasized by the institution itself, for example by Thomas Hammarberg, Chairman of the International Executive Committee in 1978: “We do not cover a broader spectrum [of rights]. This is not because we ignore the importance of all the other rights, but because we recognize that we can only achieve concrete results within set limits” (Amnesty International 1978, 1). Self-consciousness of this degree is not a reflection of shortcomings, but rather of strength. It is for this reason that debates over growth and expansion are taken seriously and are looked upon as propitious moments of opportunity, as well as tenuous points of transition. With this in mind, the architects of Amnesty International during the 1970s slowly created space, within the framework of the mandate, to build on areas of strength and, in a controlled fashion, raise its profile through the production of influential work.

In 1972, Amnesty International launched its Campaign Against Torture, which would necessitate raising the annual budget projections without knowing well where the money would come from to support the development of the initial torture report and the subsequent work in maintaining the campaign (Amnesty International 1973a). The initial push culminated in a December 1973 international conference in Paris, featuring a full-length film, *The Year of the Torturer*, and performances by Joan Baez (Amnesty International 1973b). Torture campaigns would be ignited periodically hereafter and remains a central issue (Clark 2001, chap. 2). Also in 1973, the International Executive Committee voted to take on the worldwide abolition of the death penalty as an addition to AI’s platform. While not without its controversy (Thompson 2008), this decision provided further credibility for the organization that now would even defend the lives of violent offenders facing execution by the state following conviction. Finally, this stance

would position AI to undertake the phenomenon of “extrajudicial executions,” or summary political killings of infamy from places like Uganda, Cambodia, and Iraq, and perpetrated by “death squads” notoriously operating throughout Latin America during this period (Clark 2001, chap. 5). In these areas and others, Amnesty began producing targeted reports on specific countries and was recognized for its ground breaking work on Argentina’s Dirty War with the 1977 awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize. With these developments, Amnesty International had significantly broadened its scope and burdened itself with an enormous workload during times of increasingly tighter budgetary constraints.

There is a spiraling nature to Amnesty’s work: the more its research capacity improves and the more effectively it exposes violations to the world, the more work it creates for itself. It is not as if human rights violations spiked during this decade, but rather that the knowledge of such occurrences becomes more widely available. Therefore, this tension between growth and capital is not static, but an ongoing semi-crisis that is self-perpetuating. As Amnesty spread out geographically, opening its first chapter behind the Iron Curtain in Moscow in 1974 (Larsen 1979, 86), new members solicited for more prisoners to represent. While the growth of national sections would plateau by the late-1970s, local groups would continue to mushroom at nearly the same pace, placing additional expectations on the IS for research and case adoption. Due to these rudimentary organizational questions concerning finances and objectives, Amnesty was compelled to dig deeper and seek out new ways to fund its growing enterprise. Out of this simple and mundane scenario emerged a strategy for attracting people to the cause of



human rights, building a membership base, and raising significant amounts of money for the movement.

### The Emergence of the Human Rights Benefit Concert

The financing of the Amnesty International movement has always been a delicate matter because of the rigid doctrine that governs the raising of funds for this uncompromising organization. In order to maintain neutrality, which is seen as the cornerstone of its persona, AI refuses to take government money and only rarely accepts foundation donations. Forsaking this commitment would amount to surrendering its ability to assert the universal perspective in defense of human dignity, a stance that hinges on its non-ideological and unbiased grounding. Amnesty International relies on the position it has carefully staked out for itself: a reasonable, trustworthy voice of “moral authority,” untainted by the corruption of self-interest (See throughout Hopgood 2006). During the hyper-ideological years of the late-1970s, criticisms of AI came from both the right and the left, from democratic and communist governments, from theocracies and military dictatorships, which signals the fact that Amnesty was successfully toeing the line.

In this environment, arose the question of *how* and *where* to raise the funds necessary to maintain, as well as expand, Amnesty’s capacities. The International Secretariat tasked national sections and local groups to begin generating additional funds with renewed urgency. In the newsletters that served as the main method for communication and dissemination of directives, the IS solicited for fund-raising ideas to be submitted and re-printed in the monthly installments. “Sections and groups are invited

to submit successful techniques they have used for raising funds for AI...Group 2 of Pinneberg, West Germany, for example raised 1,300 marks (about \$250) during the 1972 Prisoner of Conscience Week by the simple device of preparing a huge cauldron of hot pea soup and dispensing it to passers-by on a cold Saturday morning” (Amnesty International 1974b). Two months later, it was announced that “Group 4 of the Norwegian Section raised 20,000 Norwegian kroner last November in a one-day sale of antiques, paintings, sculpture, books, and other works of art. Group Number 2 of the Danish Section raised 900 Danish kroner with an evening of folk dancing which was combined with a fashion show at which sandwiches, coffee and second-hand clothes were sold” (Amnesty International 1974c). The addition of these local attempts at resolving the budget crisis presented themselves as cultural gatherings at which supporters of AI could donate small amounts and contribute to a larger cause. In 1976, however, the United Kingdom section tread a similar path, but on a grander scale, using its own national cultural resources, setting into motion a trend that would define the period.

At this point, Amnesty International’s coffers were essentially empty and the organization teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, while facing enormous pressures to produce (Biskind 2004, 44; Harrington 1986). Peter Luff, then Assistant Director of Amnesty International, received a check at the AI-UK office from an individual donor signed “J. Cleese” (Scheinman 2008). The check was from John Cleese of Monty Python’s Flying Circus, and Luff considered the possibility that Cleese would want to be involved in fundraising in a more central capacity. The possibility of hosting an event featuring high profile comedians would raise the exposure of Amnesty International

itself, the general awareness of human rights, as well as much needed funds. Cleese, collaborating with music and television producer, Martin Lewis, founded the events known collectively as the Secret Policeman's Balls. "A Poke in the Eye (with a Sharp Stick)," as the first official show was called, was held in 1976 at Her Majesty's Theater and raised \$40,000 for Amnesty by bringing together Cleese and his comedic comrades (McCall 1991, 46; Harrington 1986). The first three events have become known as landmark events in the history of British comedy because of the fact that they assembled two legendary comedy troupes, Beyond the Fringe and Monty Python, on one stage for the first time ever. Beyond the Fringe was of a previous generation and known for its erudite commentary and literate characters (Kinmonth 2004). Python was a younger crew, popular among a wider audience, for its skilled mix of slapstick, non sequitur, and satire. The third annual show, for the first time termed "The Secret Policeman's Ball," broadened the entertainment to include composer John Williams and guitarist for The Who, Pete Townshend. As the years went on, the shows grew in prominence, were better attended, and more lucrative.

Despite its success, the event remained a British show. In 1981, however, its profile was raised once again by the inclusion of hugely popular musicians like Sting, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, and Bob Geldof. Performers, drawn to the event by its humanitarian impulse, donated their services for no compensation. With hindsight it is clear, as will be detailed below, how the Secret Policeman's Ball was the a key impetus for the mass benefit concerts to follow, including Geldof's Live Aid. The live events were recorded and sold as record albums and movies to a larger audience that could not possibly all fit in the intimate theaters where the events were held. Harvey and Bob

Weinstein, at the time unproven American film producers who would go on to found Miramax Pictures and are considered highly influential figures, distributed *The Secret Policeman's Ball* for the American audience. Screening the film at a popular Los Angeles festival in 1982 would catapult the series to higher levels and would go on to generate \$6 million in revenue (Biskind 2004, 46). It is unclear how much of that Amnesty International ever saw, but, as Martin Lewis has said, "What they'd [the Weinstains] said to us was that the theatrical was going to generate more publicity and heat for the home video and TV. Was Amnesty unhappy? Our expectations on this were minimal, zero. Amnesty was thrilled beyond words" (Quoted in Biskind 2004, 46). The franchise would spin-off comedy and music albums and in-theater and at-home versions of the stage show, all of which sold remarkably well. Having surpassed their modest goals, these benefit events went on hiatus until their re-emergence in 1987.

### Membership, Donation, and Consumption-Based Engagement

The problems faced by AI during this period were, essentially, good problems to have: How do we carefully grow our organization in the face of vociferous calls for greater capabilities? Confronted with this dilemma, its engineers made a reasonable attempt to raise money and awareness for Amnesty's operations through the use of local celebrities soliciting for donations from the public. The final analysis of this period in AI's history is definitive: these methods successfully bolstered the budget, fostered immense growth of membership numbers, and transformed Amnesty into a global actor. By the early 1980s, international membership figures surpassed the half million mark and the IS budget approached two million. Over the course of a decade, these numbers

climbed in lock step by approximately ten times and Amnesty International had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—astounding progress by any measure.

However, during this early phase, due to financial pressures, Amnesty exposed itself to the public as charity recipient. In combination with its continuous membership drives, the formal appeal for donations rounded off a model that would expand over the course of the decade in other contexts. Audiences began to associate human rights participation with their attendance at benefit concerts, celebrity performances, and the purchase of merchandise. But, in the case of Amnesty, charity did not constitute the entire relationship because of the membership component. Membership, even when entered into for a small fee, requires at least a concern for the cause and the desire to contribute support. Allegiance to a human rights organization did not require that one vote in a certain way, or believe any certain thing beyond the claim that all humans are endowed with rights by virtue of their humanity and that human dignity is worthy of protection.

In addition to dues, Amnesty has always emphasized the dimension of action. Letter writing, from its very inception, has been the core of AI's platform. While one need not be a dues-paying member to write a letter, the format of regular member meetings at which people gather to focus on case work is the cornerstone of the movement: local chapters of ordinary people working on behalf of a prisoner or broader issue half a world away. In important ways, the membership model is that which is most familiar in the context of a local organization, not a global one. Passing around the basket at the end of a meeting is a reasonable and limited way for a community group to raise money. Membership dues are a simple way to invest activists in the organization, as well

as generate funds for central operating expenses. The possibility of building a permanent, standing human rights movement was paramount in the minds of the architects and the membership model was their way of articulating the necessity for investment and commitment. It was not sufficient for the members to serve as donors and the letter writing campaigns evidence the participatory nature of Amnesty International.

Yet, the initiation of this design also exposed human rights to the marketplace in new ways. The involvement of celebrities in human rights and the association of human rights with charity pose certain problems that will play themselves out over time, kernels of which can already be gleaned. While Amnesty pioneered letter writing as a human rights tactic, and continues to deploy this tactic with great success, forging a relationship with new audiences through the market mixes messages. It personifies human rights involvement as sufficiently fulfilled through donation and attendance at comedy shows. Equivocating participation in human rights struggle with giving to a charitable cause depoliticizes the nature of human rights. Introducing entertainers as key figures in the human rights movement engages the public on the basis of entertainment and commands a specific type of participation that potentially impedes the viability of a political stance. It is this commodification of human rights activism—the direct correlation between consumption and political engagement—that threatens to relegate this burgeoning movement to a mainstream trend.

### **Humanitarian Mass Events and Culture Industry**

#### **From the Theater to the Arena**

Across the Atlantic, the USA section of AI was feeding off the success of the American exposure to the Secret Policeman's Balls and sought to capitalize on the public

fervor around humanitarian issues. In 1984, following a large donation by U2 derived from the proceeds of a December 3 show at Radio City Music Hall in New York, AIUSA Executive Director Jack Healy began pursuing the young Irish rock band to headline a future concert tour to celebrate Amnesty's twenty-fifth birthday (McGee 2006). By August 1985, Healy had a commitment from U2 to headline a tour set to stop in six American cities, named "The Conspiracy of Hope Tour," and would feature a reunited Police, Peter Gabriel, Jackson Browne, Lou Reed, and Joan Baez (a veritable encore of her 1973 performances in Paris), among others. For Bono of U2 and Sting of The Police, the root of their affiliation with Amnesty was their association with The Secret Policeman's Ball, Bono as a viewer, Sting as a performer (Fricke 1986, 99). The purpose of the tour was to enlist 25,000 new American members committed to write one letter a month for one year towards the release of six Prisoners of Conscience adopted for the tour: Lee Kwang-Ung (South Korea); Hugo de Leon Palacios (Guatemala); Tatyana Semyonova Osipova (USSR); Riad al-Turk (Syria); Thozamile Gqweta (South Africa); and Nguyen Chi Thien (Vietnam) (Morley 1986, 56). When the dust had settled on this first spectacular event, AIUSA had matched its annual budget in revenue (\$3 million raised), tripled its membership (45,000 newly enlisted), and released four of the six POCs (McGee 2006). This concert tour idealizes the kind of success the synthesis of the benefit concert format, popular culture, and political action can produce.

Following the enormous success of Conspiracy of Hope, Healey set his sights higher, hoping to broaden the scope of the project, while readjusting the project's goals. Instead of quantitative thresholds, Healey shifted his language toward a more abstract agenda: "This was always planned as a consciousness-raising event, not a fund-raising

one” (Henke 1988b, 15). Therefore, the 1988 “Human Rights Now!” tour, coinciding with the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration, set out to visit and perform in countries throughout the world over a six-week period, from London, Paris, and Budapest to India, Zimbabwe, and Brazil. Playing to hundreds of thousands of people, the tour aimed at promoting the UDHR primarily and Amnesty secondly. However, a project of this scale would be an overwhelming undertaking even for the ambitious Healey and shortly after development had begun, it became clear that the financial cost of the tour was unsustainable.

Therefore, AI sought a partnership to help underwrite the tour and settled on Reebok, a producer of athletic apparel who agreed to fund 50 percent of the total cost (\$8 million) and front overhead as well (\$2 million); the other approximately \$9 million would be recouped by ticket prices, merchandising, and the sale of broadcast rights (Henke 1988b, 15). Given AI’s financial rigidity, forging a private sector partnership was a new foray for Amnesty. Yet, Healey himself oversaw the negotiations and performed a thorough background check of all of Reebok’s operations. What he found allayed all concerns, as Reebok had already pulled out of Apartheid South Africa and subsequently established the Reebok Human Rights Award, an annual prize still in existence today (Henke 1988a, 17). It is estimated that 1.2 million people worldwide attended the concerts and witnessed performances by Sting, Peter Gabriel, Tracy Chapman, Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, the Senegalese sensation Youssou N’Dour, as well as local featured artists (Rolling Stone 1988, 118). Without question, the Amnesty International profile had never been grander. The human rights movement had run away with the concept of the benefit concert and executed its plans effectively. Despite its



ambitions being considerably larger than its budget could withstand, Amnesty's ability to internationalize the benefit concert, coupled with the request for membership dues and the demand for political action, proved to be a winning formula for the accomplishment of its objectives.

### Humanitarianism, Famine, and Rock 'n' Roll

The Amnesty International benefit events that began on a relatively modest scale expanded quickly from theaters and concert halls to arenas and stadiums; and even wider audiences were targeted through the marketing and sales of films and albums. This transition, from intimate shows to mass events, is a crucial transformation in the history of "charity rock" and is largely attributed to one person: Sir Bob Geldof. Before the Secret Policeman's Balls, there was one predecessor that set the tone for the larger concerts to bloom in the 1980s: George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh in 1971, a singular event staged to generate funds for disaster relief in Southern Asia. With this model in mind and inspired by his personal involvement with AI, Bob Geldof set off on his own humanitarian expedition inspired by *BBC* coverage of the tale of Claire Bertschinger in a report by Michael Buerk on October 23, 1984, which described a "biblical famine" underway in war-torn Ethiopia. Bertschinger was a young, British nurse with the International Committee for the Red Cross in-country for four months before Buerk arrived with a camera crew (Duffin 2005, 13). In now-infamous imagery, she became surrounded by upwards of 85,000 starving people, clamoring for rations (Elliot 2005). Geldof, seeing this report on television, was motivated to do something to bring relief to these suffering from ostensibly remediable circumstances and began to assemble the organization that would become known as Band Aid and the concert, Live Aid.

Ironically or not, Band Aid and Live Aid would rival in spectacle the news report that spawned their existence. In December 1984, Band Aid, composed of UK rockers Phil Collins, George Michael, David Bowie, Boy George, Queen, U2, Duran Duran and others, released the ubiquitous “Do They Know Its Christmas?” Additionally, Geldof was in preparation for Live Aid, a massive concert to be held six months later in three international cities, Philadelphia, London, and Sydney (Ullestad 1992, 41). The events were broadcast to a worldwide audience of between 1.5 and 2 billion people, with syndicated telethons in twenty-two countries, and compelled viewers to give of themselves to assist those least fortunate (Coleman 1990). Despite modest projections, the initial take from these mega-events reached \$67 million (Garofalo 1992a, 27) and the subsequent sale of books and miscellaneous merchandise eventually topped \$120 million (Ockenfels and Tannenbaum 1990). This money was earmarked for specific development projects, such as “the purchase of water-drilling rigs to help with irrigation; various agricultural projects, including reforestation; medical aid; and the purchase of trucks and trailers for transportation of food and supplies” (Quoted in Garofalo 1992a, 28). Despite the panoply of critiques against which Live Aid is vulnerable (some of which will be explored below), there was a deliberate decision to frame the purpose around emergency aid for suffering people. “Long-term aid is less exciting than the Seventh Calvary arriving with food to bring people back to life,” admits Geldof (Quoted in Garofalo 1992a, 28). Live Aid became a seminal moment in the history of popular culture and politics because of the wave of copy-cat events it initiated: Farm Aid, Fashion Aid, Sports Aid, Hear’n Aid, Visual Aid (Pareles 1985), Comic Relief, Sun City, and USA for Africa—all programs that began or occurred by the end of 1985 and served some social purpose. The

integration of popular culture and ethical campaigns saturated the 1980s, becoming ubiquitous features of prime time television and mainstream public consciousness.

USA for Africa was the American rejoinder to Band Aid. Coordinated by prodigal producer Quincy Jones, Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie penned the anthem “We Are the World,” communicating a latent cosmopolitanism and concern for the welfare of those suffering from malnutrition and starvation in Africa. This organization emerged after release of the song and was designed as a short-lived operation “to meet immediate famine relief needs in Africa, to provide necessary materials and supplies to the destitute people in Africa to enable them to become self-sufficient, to provide funds for long-term economic development,...to provide emergency food, clothing, shelter and medical relief to needy people in the United States...” (Quoted in Scott and Mpanya 1994, 3). This description includes its domestic work, constituted by 10 percent of its budget, and resulting in the Hands Across America campaign to combat homelessness and poverty in the US (Scott and Mpanya 1994, 3). From the proceeds of the song alone, in 1985, USA for Africa raised \$50 million, which would rise to a single-year figure of \$98.6 million by 1989, its final year of full operation (Scott and Mpanya 1994, 57). The sheer fact of having generated numbers of this magnitude from the production of one hit single is staggering and in significant ways builds on the success of previous events.

The crisis in Ethiopia galvanized the public unlike any other international humanitarian event. Utilization of benefit concerts and popular culture, and the ability for imagery and information to be communicated through new communications technology—by 1990, 56 percent of US households had cable television, up from 12 percent in 1975 (Nielsen Group 2009, 3)—provided the wherewithal for a truly mass

sentiment to emerge. Furthermore, there is a distinction to be made between the famine alleviation campaign and Amnesty International: the substance of the campaigns themselves varied based on subject. For Band Aid, the ideal recipient was a starving, African child, while for Amnesty International the subject was a political dissident. There is a significant difference between the certain innocence of a malnourished baby and the alleged injustice perpetrated against a prisoner of conscience; the former is simply a product of forces acted upon it, while the latter presents a more complex case. The claim here suggests that subsistence rights make for a more marketable and more palatable campaign than security rights violations because of the presumption of innocence and for the perceived apolitical nature of the violation. For this same reason, natural disaster victims are another subject group that falls into the category that will perennially receive sympathetic treatment by a wider audience.

This contrast created the capacity for the campaign for Ethiopia to distinguish itself from the Amnesty comedy shows and stadium tours. The popularity of a series of events around a marketable human rights issue, such as denial of the right to food and sustenance, institutionalized the model for fund- and awareness-raising that had been developing over a decade. Production of the cause song “We Are the World” signaled a new approach to marketing human rights that combined thoroughly commercial approaches to outreach with traditional measures. Celebrity presence at events such as Live Aid spawned a relationship between humanitarian causes and the rich and famous that to us today may seem natural. Through this process, however, politics drops out of the campaigns, favoring an apolitical, charitable appeal.

## Culture Industry and the Politics of Human Rights

The politics of human rights campaigns are a complex matter. As mentioned above, Amnesty International has consistently projected itself as an apolitical organization—that is, politically non-ideological. For a global civil society actor to inject the force of its opinions into the domestic affairs of an abusive country is inherently political; yet, human rights organizations do so in times of crisis and repression, not simply during election season. Instead, human rights can be said to be politically non-ideological, which is to say is nonpartisan, unaligned, and unparticular. Universalism in human rights compels this stance and signifies the source of the power of human rights discourse: there is no position to be taken on who is right or wrong in an armed conflict, for instance, because universalism motivates the protection of all those involved on both sides. However, human rights remain a political matter as their advocates engage in challenging arbitrary and unjust exercises of power. Therefore, how is it that humanitarian campaigns of this kind find it possible to ignore the political dimension of an issue, even one that involves presumed “innocents”?

There is no discussion of the politics of the famine or the way in which food was being used as a weapon of war by Colonel Mengitsu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia, who was engaged in battle with separatist groups from Eritrea and Tigray. Humanitarian expert, Alex de Waal contends that the 1984 famine was not the product of drought at all, but that drought accentuated circumstances on the ground, namely “the bombing of markets in rebel-held areas; restrictions on movement and trade; the forced relocation of population; and finally the manipulation of relief programs” (de Waal 1997, 117). The final element on de Waal’s list is the most scandalous when considering the impact of

humanitarian aid. In order to gain access to rural populations and mediate the flow of money, the United Nations Emergency Office for Ethiopia made arrangements with Mengitsu and subsequently defended his policies of military bombardment and resettlement so as to certify the UN's in-country presence (de Waal 1997, 123-124). "There is no doubt that this relief program supported President Mengitsu militarily and politically. In Tigray, very few rural people and very many soldiers were fed by the relief. The humanitarian effort prolonged the war, and with it, human suffering" (de Waal 1997, 127).

The deployment of celebrity and popular culture in the campaign for famine alleviation smoothed the edges around a complicated problem, and unfastened the connection between the political and the economic. Because consumption was utilized as a mechanism for attracting supporters, the deeply political situation in Ethiopia was obfuscated by the cries of rock stars for donations. "The large confusing issues in the political and economic realm and the antagonisms and controversies in the social realm—all these are submerged in the experience of being at one with the lofty and great in the sphere of consumption" (Lowenthal 1984, 228). "Mass idols," as Leo Lowenthal terms celebrities, do not clarify complex political issues, but contribute to the confusion of the audience as to the full scope of the problem at hand. The practical consequences of this differentiation are evidenced by the articulation of a grassroots constituency built on faulty foundations of self-satisfying consumption that risk falling into cyclical traps of current fashions and trends. Politics is ignored in favor of a simplistic narrative of suffering and remedy. Yet, in the final episode of this period, a long-standing movement expands its scope by leveraging consumer trends for overtly political purposes.

## **Anti-Apartheid Struggle and the Role of Conscious Consumption**

### **An Ideal-Type Global Human Rights Campaign**

The worldwide movement to end Apartheid in South Africa had been in motion for thirty years by time Live Aid was winding down. An ongoing, coordinated effort consisting of local resistance and global civil society intervention was battling the white minority government with a range of tools, from guerilla warfare to boycotts, sanctions, and international legal challenges. While the global component originated in the United Kingdom, by the mid-1980s an American movement was mobilizing. American advocates called their elected officials and urged the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 (CAAA), over the veto of President Reagan. The CAAA would bring the US in line with international consensus that had been motivated by the movement and institutionalized by the UN in its Special Committee against Apartheid, begun in 1963 on the heels of the Sharpeville massacre.

The anti-Apartheid campaign is the strongest evidence from the period of the potential for a true grassroots social movement to emerge from the human rights community and challenge a systemic form of violation. Contrary to the piecemeal casework of Amnesty International or the dauntingly unrealistic task undertaken by Band Aid to end poverty in Africa, the anti-Apartheid movement exemplifies the capacity for a well-executed campaign to attain its goals and affect structural change. The issue of justice in South Africa was elevated into a mainstream cultural cause that resonated with ordinary people throughout the world. But, unlike the campaign for famine alleviation, its

mass appeal drew on the moral and political issue at hand, rather than on distractions like celebrities and pop music. And it was its focus on a universal ethical position with political remedies that demonstrates a consciousness on the part of those involved. The existence of political consciousness in a mass movement coupled with a new set of market-based tools provided the requisite foundation for the emergence of a committed community of activists. The global movement utilized a variety of forms of pressure that included domestic and international action and, more importantly, situated control in the hands of the consumer, as will be shown below. In many ways, this campaign, for its historical and global dimensions, captures certain specific characteristics that distinguish it from the other cases as the ideal-type human rights campaign: a targeted set of objectives, mass appeal, and a politically conscious constituency. The question remains whether the success in South Africa is replicable and what lessons can be gleaned for future campaigns.

A standout aspect of the anti-Apartheid movement was its specific agenda. The campaign was direct, it was clear from the beginning about its objectives, and unwavering in its commitment to see these objectives realized: Apartheid in South Africa must be dismantled and equal democratic rights must govern the country. It was not necessarily important to delve into historical details or intervene in ancient ethnic hatreds, just as it will be in crises to follow, in order to understand that a majority of the population was being subjected to a system of brutal racial discrimination. Similar to Amnesty's close focus and persistent approach to casework, the specificity contributed to its marketability because of the way participants could concentrate their efforts on an identifiable enemy. With a straightforward message, anti-Apartheid activists could



mobilize supporters to challenge the government's authority on the international stage through an uncontroversial appeal to decency, fairness, and rights.

Its “uncontroversial” nature facilitated its penetration throughout society and the world and the internationalization of the movement was a key element in its success. While in Europe the anti-Apartheid movement had been active since the 1950s, its diffusion to broader sections of the population, both in Europe and the US, occurred in the 1980s. In the US, a clearly influential comparison was made between structural racism in South Africa and that which had been overcome in the US a generation earlier. While not the same in scope or depth, the memory of the US Civil Rights Movement created a conceptual bridge for nightly news audiences that compelled participation (Nesbitt 2004, 124). Drawing on such correlations generated mass appeal and fostered a general cultural sentiment opposed to the continued abuse of black South Africans. While Live Aid, for instance, inculcated mass appeal with a pageant of celebrities and by exploiting imagery of suffering children, the anti-Apartheid movement issued a direct call for political engagement in the defense of justice and dignity. As detailed below, there was a popular culture component to this campaign but the form it took reflected the movement and manifested itself in a more radical way than those before it.

Finally, the defining characteristic of this campaign and the element that is perhaps most crucial is the awareness among activists of the political dimension of a conflict and the political solutions that the conflict demanded. Evidenced by the methods and strategies employed by activists, there was a conception advanced that Apartheid was not a random series of infractions, but rather a system that must be attacked at its core (a concept that will be missed in Bosnia, discussed in the next chapter). Being conscious of

the dynamics of power operating to sustain the system—domestic government, foreign governments, and business interests—meant designing a campaign that could infiltrate complicated political and economic institutions and influence decision-making at high levels. A constituency of advocates throughout the world was tasked with this complicated job and, therefore, methods had to be implemented to empower these citizens in such a way that would allow them to strike directly and forcefully at the system. While traditional political tools were used, lobbying and protesting for instance, new mechanisms were also introduced. Continuing the trend described in this chapter, the market was used a channel through which ordinary, concerned audiences could gain access to elite forms of power directly. By empowering a politically conscious movement in this way, the campaign to end Apartheid was positioned to be successful.

#### Cultural Boycott and Political Consumption

For the campaign, market mechanisms were deployed skillfully and in a conscious and empowering fashion. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was not a membership-based organization and did not require formal dues to be paid; nor was it a donor-based campaign that commanded a solely financial commitment from its supporters. Economic tactics provided a means for advocates to leverage their consumption in such a way that affected the politics in South Africa. Because the country was a hub of international business activity—in ways that Ethiopia, for instance, was not—boycott and divestment was able to be effective. Furthermore, the cultural segment of the boycott movement forged a connection between the benefit concert events of the period, mass consumption, and the political imperatives of the overthrow of Apartheid.

The cultural boycott of South Africa was one component of what had become by this point a global movement, spearheaded by the Anti-Apartheid Movement begun in 1959. Initially a group of South African exiles and their British supporters, the Boycott Movement was from the start conscious of its potential: “When our local purchasing power is combined with that of sympathetic organizations overseas we wield a devastating weapon” (Quoted in Gurney 1999, 33). The 1976 Soweto uprising accelerated such attempts as divestment campaigns sprung up in universities seeking to punish companies with business interests allied with the white government. Specific campaigns aimed at corporations such as Chase Manhattan, Citibank, Manufacturers Hanover, Mobil, Shell, Ford, General Motors, and IBM opposed their support for Apartheid and sought to stimulate capital flight out of South Africa (Knight 2004). Those artists that violated the cultural boycott, such as Frank Sinatra, faced the scorn of their peers and their fans. Those, like Roberta Flack, who turned down enormous contracts, were celebrated as vanguards (Reddy 1984). Most importantly, the boycott situated power in the hands of consumers and tied commercial exchange to moral principle in a meaningful and lasting way.<sup>2</sup>

Following in the footsteps of the Secret Policeman’s Ball and Live Aid, there were a range of cultural products that emerged to confront the white South African government in over the policies of Apartheid and the continued detention of Nelson Mandela. “Sun City” was the recording project of Little Steven Van Zandt (of E Street Band fame) that brought together artists to support the cultural boycott of Apartheid

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed histories of the origins and effects of the boycott movement, see Nesbitt 2004 and Thörn 2006.

South Africa and clearly had a more radical tone than did its contemporaries. Sun City is a casino, resort, and music venue located in what was then a Bantustan, and the project aimed to mobilize artists to refuse offers to perform in Sun City. Artists United Against Apartheid, the umbrella organization, was “not just an issue of solidarity with a political mass movement, but also a recognition that those involved are fighters, not simply victims” (Ullestad 1992, 49). In addition to the initial song that spanned musical genres, bringing together Public Enemy, George Clinton, Pat Benatar, Hall and Oates, and Joey Ramone, Sun City was also a music video with MTV airplay and a book geared toward educating the public on Apartheid (Ullestad 1987, 67). What differentiated this campaign from its predecessors is that was more overtly political, with narrow aims and a specific target.

Furthermore, on July 11, 1988 in London, a seventieth birthday celebration was held for Nelson Mandela at Wembley Stadium and broadcast worldwide to 600 million viewers. Again with a deliberately political tone, artists took the stage to demand the release of the leader of the African National Congress (ANC) and for an end to Apartheid generally. The song “Sun City” was featured, as was “Biko,” Peter Gabriel’s tribute to the martyred ANC leader Steve Biko that had also been performed at AI’s 1986 Conspiracy of Hope tour. In the US, the concert received an abbreviated and censored broadcast on arch-conservative Rupert Murdoch’s Fox Network, which was edited for content and from which was removed anti-Apartheid ranting by the artists; incidentally, the television version was also paid for with advertising by many companies still conducting business in South Africa. The 72,000 fans in attendance at Wembley that day were treated to a dizzying array of star power that measurably raised the profile of the

global anti-Apartheid movement (Garofalo 1992b, 56-60). In 1990, once Mandela was released from Robben Island, another mega-event was held in London to celebrate his freedom. However, by this point, even MTV declined to air the concert because “they had already committed to airing a Muscular Dystrophy benefit shortly after the Mandela date” and could only manage one benefit broadcast in a short period of time (Garofalo 1992b, 63). This conclusive point evidences in many ways the perception of “charity rock” by the end of the period—that despite its political efficacy, there was a limit to what the public and the market would tolerate with respect to cause-driven cultural events.

#### Tactical Integration and the Takedown of Apartheid

Glaringly unique about the anti-Apartheid movement was its skillful blend of political and economic tools. In addition to political pressure, the use of boycotts and sanctions created economic consequences for South Africa’s political decisions. These measures were sweeping and aimed to punish business interests that operated in and with the rogue state. Besides the obvious point that sanctions and boycotts hurt the bottom line, their other primary effect was to endow ordinary consumers with extraordinary power. This introduced a great degree of democracy into the marketplace where conscious consumers could “vote” with their dollar. Effectively, through practices such as divestment, citizens were able to shift the current against the white government by increasing the costs on commercial enterprises. The balance of power tilted in favor of civil society as an exodus of businesses continued through the end of the 1980s.

The multi-pronged attack initiated by movement activists was enormously successful and presents a synthesis of human rights activism of this period. As described

above, the cultural realm was influential in expanding a base of supporters and making the boycott front-page news. Artists and musicians lent their names and their talents to the cause, raising the profile of the campaign especially in the US where activity had been lagging well behind that in Europe. The confluence of cultural, political, and economic attacks on South Africa worked synergistically and constituted the greatest global human rights movement since the abolition of slavery. This statement is not at all to discount the local struggle that had been waged since the 1950s in South Africa; on the contrary, the further convergence between local and global activists was central to the ultimate downfall of the regime and the liberation of black South Africans.

However, while there are many lessons to take away from this campaign, it is a dangerous proposition to attempt to replicate it and expect the same level of success. It is true that the skillful blend of political, economic, and cultural methods was a central component to the movement's efficacy and the abstract lesson of integrated tactics is an important one. Yet, the movement was also thirty years in the making. Global civil society efforts were a supplementary force to the ANC's bloody battle underway on the ground. While the international presence lent credibility to the ANC, it would not have been sufficient in the absence of a local struggle. In anticipation of the difficult cases of mass atrocities that the human rights movement would confront in the 1990s, organizations have neither the privilege of waging a lengthy battle, nor a local resistance movement to counterbalance. Furthermore, there is considerably less moral ambiguity in the South African case than there will be in future wars where violations are more equitably distributed on both sides (ANC had a history in the 1960s and 1970s of terrorist activity that was largely glossed over by the 1980s movement). For these reasons, the

case of the anti-Apartheid movement as an ideal-type human rights campaign is a tenuous claim to make and its instructive characteristics must be understood in their historical context.

### **Conclusion: Solidarity or Self-Indulgence?**

It is clear that new doors were opened for human rights during this period. The deployment of the culture industry undeniably extended awareness of human rights to enormous numbers of people. Funding of human rights initiatives exploded as campaigns in the defense of human dignity gained mainstream popular appeal. Membership in human rights organizations rose significantly, enabling the expansion of casework for political prisoners and other issues. The market became a realm for political consumerism that benefited human rights interests, while simultaneously satisfying individual desires.

As narrated above, the channels through which human rights emerged were unique and groundbreaking. Average citizens were concerned with and invested in the human welfare of other people, strangers unlike themselves whom they would never meet. The contemporary human rights movement was constructed as a standing constituency of defenders prepared at a moment's notice to fire off a letter to a foreign head of state and rally for the protection of human dignity. This point cannot be over-emphasized: the attempt to establish a global grassroots movement permanently assembled for the protection of human rights everywhere is a novel occurrence in human history and was facilitated, in part, through patterns of mass consumption. However, human rights activism during the 1980s is constituted by an awkward combination of solidarity and self-indulgence. Celebrity endorsement and popular cultural events stir up public fervor for mass movements, which is not to say that these ethical commitments are

disingenuous, but rather that they are mired in a wash of self-satisfying behavior. This contradiction—of self-serving and other-regarding behavior, of egoistic and empathic behavior—embodies the tension of the period.

A generational effect also played a role in the emergence of this phenomenon. As the baby boomer generation reaches middle age in the 1980s, benefits from the shifts in personal finance, they are drawn to mass consumption, while retaining their 1960s history. The same cross-section that invested in money market funds and stocks were also engaged in grassroots struggles twenty years prior. The same generation that rebelled at Woodstock, Stonewall, and Selma, maintained their political consciousness, while being seduced by luxury consumption and materialism. For this reason, charity rock appeared with such force as the perfect synthesis of radical political culture and consumerism. Protest music and cause songs were familiar to this audience because of the impression that Pete Seeger, John Lennon, and Bob Dylan had on their cultural memory. Charity rock is the 1980s version of protest music, but on a grander stage and with explicit emphasis on the consumption as a mechanism for social change. However, charity rock is born of the era of the one-dimensional rock star—the ostentatious front man co-opted by capital and transformed into a marketing tool, a logo, a brand unto himself. For instance, critics lambasted the “We Are the World” song because of the way in which it echoes the slogan of Pepsi, who happens to employ the song’s authors, Lionel Richie and Michael Jackson, as spokespersons (both employ the language of “choice” in similar ways) (Greil Marcus quoted in Garofalo 1992a, 29). The heroic image of popular musician as politically conscious artist is a controversial suggestion because popular culture is no longer a realm of rebellion.



Despite the ever present pull of consumer capitalism and the way in which it compels the kinds of behavior described here throughout, the South African case illustrates how the reins of the market can be harnessed for human rights purposes. With the initiation of boycotts, sanctions, and divestment as new activist tools, the impulses toward individualistic consumption and the exercise of freedom in the market are directed in the service of human rights. It seems as if it possible for one to pursue one's own self-interest while deliberately creating positive externalities. The final lesson learned from South Africa is that the success was based in the solidarity of global citizens with specific goals active in the economic *and* political realms. Contemporary campaigns that utilize the market-based model, but fail to involve themselves in political struggles are limited in their capacity and vulnerable to fall victim to the seduction of capitalism as a vehicle for progress.

Following closely the critical theory approach of the Frankfurt School, one must consistently be suspicious of coincidence like this because industrial capitalism is not designed to advance human emancipation; instead, it perpetually co-opts and commodifies those forces that demand change. Quoting Marcuse:

It solves this contradiction by closing all avenues of escape, protest, refusal and dissociation, by absorbing or defeating all effective opposition, by closing itself against qualitative social change, namely the emergence of qualitatively new forms of human existence, and by suffocating the need for social change. (Marcuse 2001, 88)

Ultimately, the risks posed by the deployment of popular culture are real, but are not determinate. In the case of Live Aid, the commercial outweighed the humanitarian impulses, eliminating politics in favor of shallow emotional sentimentality. However, in the cases of Amnesty International and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, engineers of the

movement, I believe, were careful to maintain a balanced blend of political action and consumer behavior. They present glimmers of promise wherein market trends are infused with ethical substance, in many ways predating 21<sup>st</sup> century commodity currents that identify goods as “fair trade,” “green,” or “cruelty-free.” Solidarity with suffering people can be expressed through shopping, but this equilibrium is easily upset, as self-indulgence lacking concern for others is a seductive feature of consumerism. It is difficult to imagine a truly radical movement emerging from the commercial sphere, but one that prioritizes political action and engagement is within the realm of possibility.

### **CHAPTER 3 – THE SPECTACLE OF SUFFERING AND HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTIONS IN SOMALIA AND BOSNIA**

*“...television has become the privileged medium through which moral relations between strangers are mediated in the modern world.”*  
– Michael Ignatieff (1985, 57)

*“...television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high...”* – Neil Postman (1985, 16)

#### **Introduction**

If the 1980s human rights campaigns attracted audiences through celebrities and pop music, the 1990s connected people through new visual media. Due to advances in information and communications technology, a new wave of globalization was initiated that brought the world closer together and viewers were afforded glimpses into the world's celebration and suffering. The penetration facilitated by satellites and cable television ushered in an era in which the visual dimension assumed a primary role: consumption of news, art and entertainment, personal interaction, market preferences, and even political engagement were mediated through the broadcast of images. Neither print nor radio disappeared and face-to-face communication did not cease, but they became supplemented by venues that were increasingly convenient—quicker, easier, and more accessible. Yet, this rapid shift toward visual media was disposed toward excessiveness and gave way to an age of hyper-saturation aptly described as an age of spectacle (Debord 1983; Kellner 2003).

Through new media, images stream at the audience with omnipresent and overwhelmingly spectacular displays, designed to entice, intrigue and attract, pummeling our eyes and our minds with information and entertainment. The television set is the primary site of the contemporary society of the spectacle with its capacity to visually impact a critical mass of the Western audience. At once, this venue acts as amusement and distraction from the miserable pain of daily life and provides a necessary, temporary escape into the realm of fantasy. At the same time, television serves the public with invaluable access to far off places that details stories of human struggle and sheds light on matters of great international importance. However, if “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 2003), or even if “the medium is the metaphor” (Postman 1985), what is the effect on the audience when content of a serious nature is communicated through a platform like television that is so thoroughly fraught with levity and commercialism?

This chapter details the impact of graphic imagery of suffering on the ability of the human rights movement to mobilize behind humanitarian intervention, specifically in the cases of Somalia and Bosnia. Following the expansion of the movement during the 1970s and 1980s, with its exposure to the mainstream through celebrity endorsement and benefit concerts, the 1990s presented new opportunities for growth, specifically due to developments in visual mass media. However, similar to the integration of human rights with mass culture in the earlier era, these new platforms for activism also produced stumbling blocks. While atrocity television demonstrates its ability to engage the audience and motivate a civil society response, instances also reveal the audience to tune out imagery of distant suffering, literally and figuratively. The interplay between the media and the audience with respect to human rights encapsulates the dialectic of the

global information age: at one moment, it is clear that this period presents an amazing opportunity for social solidarity, democratization of foreign policy, and cosmopolitanism. However, these same forces can be turned against themselves as firms shape new networks as avenues for advertising, consumerism, and distraction from politics. A critical look at the effect of technology and media on human rights activism evidences the potential for progress even in the face of deep structural obstacles.

In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union and supported by the tailwinds of victory in South Africa, the human rights community was positioned to advance its norms with greater proficiency. Furthermore, with the advent of cable television and satellite transmission, the human rights movement was presented with, potentially, the answer to many of its previous problems. Since the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, a popular human rights mantra has maintained that information is the key to stopping atrocities in progress and preventing those that lie immanent: “If only the public knew what was going on behind those walls, something could have been done,” many observers would opine. Despite the fallacy that nobody knew what was being carried out in the Nazi camps, the imagery that emerged from Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald in 1945 was so startling that it shocked the conscience of the world. Therefore, were similar imagery of suffering to surface thereafter, it would follow that civil society could coalesce to protect the innocent victims portrayed in the photographs. However, recent history tells a contrary tale that demonstrates how the opposite may well be true—the claim that information deficit is at the root of inaction ignores the possibility that information overload may be equally detrimental.

Crises and conflicts of the past provide insight into the possible effects of imagery from war zones has on its audience: the experience of observing the pain of others, even at a distance, has the ability to touch the audience in a deep and personal way. Audience members as a group are not affected evenly, but a connection may be forged through witnessing the suffering of other humans—a psychological bond that hinges on a sensibility of human sameness. Even if a television viewer has never been the parent of a starving child or has never been tortured, she can empathize with the suffering other because of her familiarity with hunger and pain of a less severe nature. An emotional response is evoked with a myriad of subsequent effects that are reflected back on the viewer and range from dismissal and disgust to outrage and protest. From a human rights perspective, a question to be explored in this chapter is whether the audience's experience with imagery of suffering on television is likely to translate into political action for intervention on behalf of the suffering, or is the emotional reaction merely a fleeting feeling that quickly evaporates?

To begin, it is necessary to understand the context for the emergence of the spectacle in the post-cold war era. I contend that the arrival of neoliberal globalization and due to advances in information and communications technology (ICT), a new era of spectacle dawned. The medium that exemplifies this period is the television because, while the Internet was in a stage of maturation in the 1990s, the television reached an overwhelming number of households and, with the expansion of global media conglomerates, content on television was expanding as well. These developments provide reason for hope, as well as cause for concern. Broader audiences became exposed to global events and became more intimately connected to the suffering affecting so many,

but this was only possible in an environment built on consumerism and entertainment. Yet, perhaps the profit motive compels media companies to provide emotive stories for the audience that speak to the common denominator in all of us; namely, human frailty. This may put into motion a process whereby our moral communities, that group we consider ourselves close to and close enough to act on behalf of, are expanded to include suffering strangers. Or, perhaps the medium itself consolidates distance and alienates us from the suffering other because of the nature of television and our associations with it as a realm of diversion and fiction.

Ultimately, the question at hand helps clarify a crucial foundation for human rights activism in the post-cold war. To the extent that engagement with human rights issues by the audience is motivated solely by an emotional response to imagery of suffering, it may signal the superficiality of the mass appeal of human rights. If this is the case, then lacking is the crucial element that emerges from 1980s activism: political consciousness. A cosmopolitan empathic stance in support of human rights may be sufficient to motivate temporary uproar, but it is not the groundwork for a unified, sustained, and effective campaign for humanitarian intervention. When the international community is confronted with instances of mass atrocity, as it frequently was in the 1990s, the movement is exposed as fractured and fragmented, rather than a committed constituency founded on solidarity with suffering people.

This chapter details the evolution of the spectacle of suffering in the post-cold war world as it relates to and affects the audience's mobilization in support of human rights protection. With an investigation into the cases of Somalia and Bosnia, the role of imagery proves to be a central and telling prism through which to explore the onset of

this period. As each story unfolds, history and cultural memory are mediated through contemporary imagery and impact the way in which the audience receives news of atrocity and suffering. Actors—policymakers, activists, journalists, and spectators—are confronted with coverage of human rights abuse in progress and are forced to wrestle with the ethical and political questions that arise. The consequences of their actions illuminate the relevance of the media in shaping decision-making and in the formation of public opinions. What becomes clear is that the sensational coverage can be used to serve the interests of the powerful, as well as those of the victimized. The battle over spectacle is waged by geopolitical players, commercial media outlets, and human rights advocates, with the former two often demonstrating greater mastery for spinning and manipulating the substance of suffering on television.

In the initial phase, real time coverage of events in Somalia in 1991-1992 demonstrated the immediately central role occupied by media spectacle in this era. Deeply reminiscent of the starvation of the Congolese in 1960, Biafrans in 1968, and Ethiopians in 1984, graphic imagery from Somalia galvanized the public consciousness as a cause in dire need of redress. The subsequent stream of video of US Marines landing on the shore heroically, calling back to Normandy, perpetuated the mass support for humanitarian intervention. However, as swept up as the public had become over providing assistance to Somalia, the tide would turn just as swiftly with the debacle in Mogadishu resulting in eighteen dead Americans and hundreds of dead Somalis, dramatized as *Black Hawk Down*. This section chronicles the evolving public perceptions of this event throughout its duration by focusing exclusively on the imagery generated by coverage of the intervention in Somalia. This phase illustrates the possibility for spectacle



to be a source of unity and solidarity, yet also exposes human rights advocates as a constituency driven as much by emotion as by political consciousness or cosmopolitan sensibility. Emotions are vulnerable to co-optation by the corporate media for their role in driving viewership of an event, while geopolitical actors recognize ways in which popular sentiments can be leveraged to advance their own agendas.

Overlapping with and then eclipsing Somalia, coverage from the Balkans of human rights abuse produced a complex and troubling series of consequences that transformed the human rights movement fundamentally. Cultural memory, both for the US and for European nations, played a crucial role in fomenting groundswell for intervention in the Bosnia: images of gaunt, light-skinned bodies behind barbed wire fences, awaiting death on the European continent triggered a barrage of comparisons to the Holocaust, which continues to set the standard against which all evil and all good is compared. However, images of the Serbian camps did not result in intervention, dealing a setback to the causal relationship between witnessing suffering and protecting human rights. While military action would eventually halt the march of genocide, following the revelations of the Marketplace Massacre and the fall of Srebrenica, this only occurred after three years of conspicuous brutality by Bosnian Serb forces. This calls into question the classic human rights concept that raising awareness is sufficient for commanding political action. If bearing witness is no longer a powerful human rights tool, exactly *what kind* of engagement is provoked by graphic imagery of suffering? Are audiences entertained? Are audiences outraged? Are audiences ambivalent? Are audiences numb? And, what types of actions are taken in response to these emotional states? Following the

lessons of the 1980s, to be determined in this chapter is the effect that spectacle has on the form and content of human rights activism.

The cases evidence a range of vacillating reactions of audiences to media representation of human rights abuse. Overall, the story that unfolds is one of emotional outpouring of sentimentality for suffering innocents on television in the context of ascending norms surrounding the use of force for humanitarian goals. What results is a splintered human rights movement held hostage by mediated spectacles. The spectacle of suffering is sufficient to provoke a shallow, emotional response from the audience, but fails to serve as the foundation for a solidarity effort. Audiences experience the suffering of others without political consciousness and without regard for the dignity of the subject due to the medium through which these images travel. Television, by its nature, objectifies its content, fictionalizes reality, and alienates the audience from the real world and from itself as a collective. Thus, the human rights movement proves itself to be constituted as a pressure group of atomized individuals, rather than a cohesive, forceful protest movement. In order to dissect and justify this reasoning, this chapter explains the use of the term “spectacle,” provides context in social, economic, and technological terms, and proceeds with the case studies of the Somali and Bosnian interventions.

### What is the Spectacle?

The tendency in mass media to traffic heavily in images of suffering is often described in the literature and in commentary as “pornography of war,” “pornography of violence,” or “disaster pornography” (see Baudrillard 2008, Mamdani 2007, and Omaar and de Waal 1993, respectively). The allusion to pornography in this context relates to at

least two characteristics: the way imagery of brutality and violence appeals to our prurient interests, and the exploitative nature of graphic imagery of suffering victims. Drawing comparisons between atrocity photography and pornography suggests a certain self-indulgence in observing others in vulnerable, intimate and sensitive positions, while also injecting a power dynamic that connects the subject and object. My analysis focuses on less conspicuous effects of the visual image on the audience, in a distinct way from other deployments of the term “spectacle.” In cases where scholars and observers use the language of spectacle, it is often to signify something spectacular and visually stunning, without necessarily implying anything more (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006). While the spectacle in its usage herein will obviously apply to its visuality, I deploy this term in a specific manner fixed to Guy Debord and the Situationist International.

For Debord, “the society of the spectacle” was a particular description of modern times as obsessed and mystified by appearance. “The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into *having*—human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from *having* to *appearing*...” (Debord 1983, para. 17). If Marcuse, Adorno, and others originated the critique of the society of mass consumption, Debord continues in this tradition and identifies the spectacle as an extension of capitalism and “the image” to be a new plane of commodification for the exercise of social control. For Debord, “the spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own

laws” (Debord 1983, para. 44). Debord sees advanced capitalism as a force that suffocates radical politics and preserves the status quo at all costs. Therefore, by framing the spectacle of suffering in a human rights context, I am attempting to coherently discuss the impact of the spectacle on the political potential of human rights activism, going beyond the mere description of spectacular imagery as a consequence of mass media.

The “spectacle” is a term I deploy to describe, on the one hand, a qualitative aspect of the media environment of the post-cold war era, as well as the subject matter of discrete media events. As will be detailed in the next section, developments in technology and global capital facilitate the transmission of news and information in an accelerated fashion and primary among the transmitted content is the image. Words and sounds were the central mechanism of previous mass media platforms, print and radio. As the pre-eminently visual medium, in the 1990s television expands its range with heightened intensity and deeper societal penetration. The priority of the image in modern communication facilitates a shift in the meaningfulness of appearance itself because, in an age of spectacle, “appearing to be” suffices for “being.” Projecting an image, real and symbolic, replaces the need to embody the truth referent of that image; this is to say, for instance, it may only be necessary to appear to be heroic in the face of danger, rather than actually undertake an heroic act. This configuration says much about the actors, the audience, and the medium. Spectacle is the permissive context that nurtures these relations, as well as descriptive of the events themselves. Complicating this scenario further is the role of commercialism in spectacle. Because mass media is the product of and a venue for commercial profit seeking, the contradictions generated by the

substitution of appearance for reality entail the blurring of hard news with entertainment and advertising.

For this reason, the spectacle of suffering is a specific consequence of this media environment with human rights implications. While previously news of human rights violations traveled effectively across radio, print, and earlier phases of television, the speed and saturation of images sets the post-cold war period apart. The spectacle of suffering is responsible for the ubiquity of graphic coverage of brutality and humiliation in ordinary settings: Viewing suffering on television, during the prime time dinner hour, provides a complicated context in which to digest material of such a severe nature. Night after night, and story after story, repetition of imagery of suffering becomes so familiar to the audience so as to affect how this news and information is absorbed, processed, and the reaction induced. Western audiences become attuned to coverage of children, women and the elderly fleeing war zones and natural disasters, but the audience's response is not uniform. This chapter attempts to provide an explanation of how and why the response to imagery of suffering has shifted over time. As the narrative below suggests, the spectacle of suffering has roots in earlier forms of newsgathering during events such as the Biafran War, the Vietnam War, and the Ethiopian famine. These events occurred in an antiquated media environment, however, when news was not captured and transmitted in real time, with an embedded sense of urgency. Spectacle entails the milieu in which serious content is communicated through a commercial medium in a manner that is so overwhelming that the audience is affected socially and psychologically.

However, the fact that nightly news coverage features human rights issues is not inherently a bad thing; on the contrary, cable television is an essential medium through

which the public stays connected to worldly events. However, the mediated environment in which we live is in fact an advanced society of spectacle in Debord's terms—an environment defined by its saturation with streaming imagery and a persistent threat to progressive politics. In the post-cold war era, there has been no shortage of spectacular suffering beamed into the living rooms of Western viewers: refugees in flight, starving African children in crossfire, burnt American Ranger corpses, mortal machete wounds, mass graves, concentration camps, planes flying into skyscrapers, and degrading detainee torture, to name several. The impact of spectacle on the recipient is complex—provocative, yet paralyzing; fascinating, yet redundant. Constant visualization of one conflict after the next injects a new, previously unheard-of ethnic minority into common parlance: Kurds, Hutus, Tutsis, Bosniaks, Kosovar Albanians. At what point does the repetition of ghastly, brutal imagery transform both the subject and object, and how? Is the audience able to separate the difficult reality of events from the otherwise light content on television? Is there a point at which human rights becomes mere human interest? Can the audience distinguish between coverage of a humanitarian intervention and that of the rescue of a cat stuck in a tree? In order to investigate these critical questions, it is necessary to set the stage on which these dramatic transformations in media communications, human rights, and politics took place.

### **The Socio-Political Economy of Spectacle**

#### **Globalization, the Information Age and the Network Society**

The manifestation of spectacle in the post-cold war period is the product of a set of parallel and interrelated developments associated with globalization: transition to a knowledge-based economy and growth of a networked society. As a series of rapid

transformations swept over the world in the early 1990s, observers attempted to frame this new epoch and understand its impact on daily life. A sense of proximity and connectedness was enveloping a broad range of social spaces, from the economic realms of labor, production, and consumption, to cultural concepts and political organization. However, the profound effects experienced as much by peripheral societies as by international society itself, were not random, nor coincidental, but rather the result of a long process of scientific investigation, social change and market expansion.

The central factor that enables globalization to take shape is technology. Facilitating this shift was an infrastructure of fiber optic cables, satellites, online bulletin boards, and corporate media outlets that formed an enmeshed global network. Through these channels, activity traveled instantaneously across great distances, at low costs. Finance became entirely mobile; supply chains were rerouted through new points of origin; and migrant labor provided the workforce for the new economic environment. With mass production shifting locales from North to South, a knowledge-based economy materialized in the developed world. Labor increasingly operated outside the confines of trade unions, and under the direction of consolidated multinational conglomerates. In place of the Fordist assembly line, the post-industrial, post-Fordist economy is globalized, disaggregated, and underscored by its provision of services and reliance on information technology. Instead of factories, freelance, contracted workers began tenures in cubicles, employed on a temporary, non-benefited basis. Markets emerged in places previously beyond the pale and, especially in the West, capital penetrated more deeply into areas that would have previously been considered private and out of reach.

Not only did information technology provide the infrastructure for capital to operate, it also provided new channels for the market to expand its access to consumers. Information takes the form of breaking news headlines, but it also takes the form of advertisement driving consumption. Television is a vehicle for creating and targeting demographics of consumers and provides access for corporations to these consumers in their homes, while they relax with their families. Global capitalism at the end of the twentieth century is increasingly personalized and pre-packaged, while the individual is ever more accustomed to constant confrontation with advertising and commercialism. It has become part of daily life and slips easily into the backdrop of all environments; while not necessarily overt, information as advertising takes on an inconspicuous presence, constantly operating but rarely noticed. Whether these channels can be shaped to serve the interests of the humiliated and downtrodden is one question that motivates the argument in this chapter.

Essentially, this characteristic—the critical role played by information and technology as the driving forces and platforms for economic transaction—is what is meant when commentators discuss the “New Economy” and is definitive of neoliberal globalization (Castells 2004; Hassan 2004). So hopeful were capitalists in these early years that Microsoft founder Bill Gates called these manifestations evidence of a new “friction-free capitalism”: an open market system with the least resistance, minimal externalities, and maximal profit (quoted in Hassan 2004, 11). The Information Age, as the post-cold war era is often described, is the consequence of the New Economy and suggests the preeminent role played by information, in terms of the facilitation of the economy, as well as the way in which it organizes non-economic arenas. The most



glaring change in the way information was transmitted and received in this period correlates to the speed, volume, and the depth of its diffusion into everyday life. As “informationalism...subsumed industrialism as the dominant technological paradigm...” (Castells 2004, 8), a social, cultural and structural shift was also underway.

### Spectacle on TV

Television is the technological medium that ushers in globalization and personifies the perception of commonality among the global audience in the early 1990s. From a twenty-first century perspective, the Internet is the quintessential globalizer, but after the cold war, it was television that captured the imagination of the masses with instantaneous transmission of moving images across cable networks and satellite constellations. Innovations in communications technology and corporate consolidation of media ownership permitted uniformity in broadcast, as viewers internationally shared in visual experiences together. While television itself was not a novel technology, having made inroads through Western affluent classes in the 1950s, during the 1980s the medium reached across classes in the West and began to diffuse more broadly. Deregulation in the communications sector permitted corporate consolidation of centralized sources of information, even as the illusion of more television channels suggested the contrary. Driven by wider access, market impulse, and technological capacity, media outlets accelerated information transmission by speed and volume. To occupy the airwaves of twenty-four-hour networks, the sheer amount of on-air content was valued for its own sake, and the traditional categories of news and entertainment collapsed. A range of actors would soon confront the nature of the new media environment, from political officials and revolutionaries, to athletes and celebrities.

Spectacle on television is born of this climate, with the rise of the graphic image as the essential platform for communication. However, visuality alone does not suffice to explain the emergent spectacle; the nature of media coverage itself had taken a spectacular turn and initiated a spiraling fusion of news and entertainment. Due to competition on cable networks for viewership and advertising dollars, sensationalism drove newsgathering in a way that departed from previous models. Newsworthiness becomes that which attracts the largest audience, rather than being driven by relevance or necessity. Therefore, the historic divide on television between hard news and entertainment began to erode, creating space for the hybrid version we are left with today—a context in which it is difficult for a viewer to decipher where the categories begin and end.

Late-twentieth century media culture highlights the extreme, the perverse, and the absurd. Events ranging from the OJ Simpson Trial and the Super Bowl, to the impeachment of Bill Clinton and a Michael Jordan slam dunk typify the context for spectacle (Kellner 2003). Even the tragic death of Princess Diana was transformed into spectacle, with the paparazzi covering the car crash and subsequent controversy, as closely as the royal funeral and the international grieving that followed. Mass event and scandal reign, and significance is squeezed out. Saturation of the airwaves with information of little consequence gives the impression that what is featured on the nightly news is newsworthy—thus beginning a perpetual feedback of hype and aggrandizement. In the spectacle, “tabloidized infotainment culture is increasingly popular,” which has a reflexive effect on events and issues that *actually* demand attention (Kellner 2003, 1). As media culture is increasingly shaped by spectacle, the irrelevant is elevated as relevant,

while pressing issues become mired amidst a fog of the bizarre, the gratuitous, and the intriguing. When violent conflict and natural disaster are transmitted through the same channels and in the same manner as sex scandals and celebrity controversies, audience receptivity is ripe for confusion, alienation, and apathy.

This is still not saying enough, though, because it is not only news or the perception of news that is affected by spectacle, it is indeed the spectator herself. Media spectacle “describes a media and consumer society organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events” (Kellner 2003, 2). The claim here is that spectacle is the consequence of an advanced capitalist system that seeks new realms of colonization through which to exert social control. In this context, audiences are vulnerable to manipulation and likely to support a war that serves material or geopolitical interests, but not their own. Jean Baudrillard, during the televised invasion of Iraq in 1991, asked whether or not it was “really taking place” (Baudrillard 2008b). The newly-inaugurated Cable News Network (CNN) broadcasted night-vision video of missiles coasting through the air as if in a video game, but shockingly little footage of actual people engaged in combat. Because the audience is unable to have a realistic experience with war, it is impossible to critique its rationale and its conduct, thereby acquiescing to state decision-making. If contemporary visual media fabricates a copy of reality and, through mediation, transmits the copy, rather than the actual version of the world, then critical deliberation can only take place in the fictional realm, dispossessing the masses of sovereign authority over its politics.

This has the consequence of distancing the audience from the severe nature of crises and catastrophes. Because the audience comes into contact with the world through

a shadow of reality, public opinions become easily manipulated; a clear example being televised, bloodless wars that more closely resemble a virtual reality than the human hell of warfare. A sanitized rendition of the ugly affair of war has the effect of numbing the audience to the terror of combat and its horrific effects. This is notably the case in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the public was not subjected to the realities of the conduct of war and only recently were the news media permitted to cover the return home of flag-draped caskets. Watching crises unfold on television places them alongside romantic sitcoms, hospital dramas, and game shows, making for an opaque media environment in which to form judgments.

With this experience of mediated events, the audience suffers from alienation on two fronts: psychologically and socially. Internally, the viewer is pacified by a spectacle that “stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life – recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice. The concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation passivity, for in submissively consuming spectacles one is estranged from actively producing one’s life” (Kellner 2003, 2-3). The all-encompassing nature of visual distraction satiates individual desire by first falsely producing needs fulfilled only by commodities. In a sense, however, society of spectacle builds on the society of mass consumption by *showing* the consumer commodities as consistently as possible; thus, the emphasis on advertising as a product of spectacle (though Chapter 4 focuses specifically on advertising). Through the individual’s perpetual quest for commodity accumulation, the alleviation of political problems is obscured by the bombarding glare of spectacular imagery.

Socially, this alienation is magnified and contributes directly to collective political apathy. Quoting Debord, “spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness*” (Debord 1983, sec. 29). Television, in this analysis, is the “center” that at once unifies, as well as atomizes its viewership. It produces a common experience but, in doing so through a commercial medium, the individual is compelled to seek out self-satisfaction, at her own demise and at the demise of society’s collective goals. Discussion of “lonely crowds,” for Debord, demonstrates a central contradiction of the spectacle; namely, the ability to be among many people, yet still be utterly alone (Debord 1983, para. 28). Alienation prevents the formation of social movements and the assembly of individuals for a range of purposes but, most problematic from a human rights perspective, are those that aim to motivate social and political change and advance freedom. In light of this critique, the question of globalization as a cosmopolitan community-builder is a difficult one: “While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of spectacular separation” (Debord 1983, para. 167).

Yet, in the age of global media spectacle, there was a tangible shift in the way audience members related to the world. Penetration of graphic imagery created opportunity for proximity and participation in real time. To reiterate, while television was not new, the immediacy with which its broadcast was transmitted and the depth and breadth of its reach were unique to the early 1990s. Whether it was the invasion of allied forces in Somalia or refugees in Serbian detention camps, television coverage of human rights events provided the wherewithal for civil society to monitor action in progress. The

cases below detail how this tension played out during the period, whose interests were served, and how the human rights movement was affected. Departing from Debord's rigid structure, the thesis advanced in this chapter is that spectacle opens space for empathic engagement and the expansion of moral community, but ultimately seals off terrain for committed and conscious political activism. This chapter pivots on the proposition that a connection is forged between the individual audience member and the individual suffering on television through spectacle—but if, and how, this experience benefits human rights protection remains to be seen. Despite the way in which this phenomenon bloomed in the 1990s, even through pre-spectacle media, audiences have demonstrated a curiosity of and attraction to atrocity photographs that provide historical precursors for what will follow.

### **The Iconography of Famine**

#### **Precursors to Spectacle: Congo 1960 and Biafra 1968**

The emergence of the spectacle of suffering in the 1990s, as I trace it, is the product of an aggregate of factors: developments in ICT, corporate media consolidation, geopolitical space created by the end of the cold war, and competition among NGOs for air time and donor attention. However, it is also the consequence of an historical trend that manifests itself again at this auspicious moment. Public response to media coverage of previous humanitarian crises set the tone for future incidents. Specifically, events in Congo in 1960 and Nigeria in 1968 provide antecedent cases through which to study the effect of visual imagery of suffering on the audience's mobilization in support of human rights. Both demonstrate the crucial role photography can play in elevating a crisis to the status of a cause célèbre.

Reluctantly, in 1960, Belgium relinquished control on its long-held and thoroughly terrorized territory of the Congo. While the history of King Leopold II's personal colony has been deftly explored (Hochschild 1999), the post-colonial Congo also was fraught with dire suffering. In the chaos that ensued following the evacuation of Belgian forces, the UN, under the direction of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, initiated its first peacekeeping intervention into the heart of darkness. But, on the fringes of Leopoldville, hunger set in among rural inhabitants and refugees from the violence in the capital. As this story made headlines in the UK, Oxfam experienced a rise in public stature through its aid appeals for the famine in Congo. "On 18 December 1960, the *Observer* carried a brief front-page story about mass starvation in a corner of the newly independent Congo...Thousands were no more than walking skeletons and many were swollen from hunger... People working for Oxfam at the time remember that story in the *Observer* with the clarity normally reserved for the deaths of presidents and the outbreak of war." (Black 1992, 63). For Oxfam, and the greater British humanitarian aid community, Congo was the event that catapulted care and concern for those suffering from hunger into a mainstream position—all of which became possible due directly to the visual imaging of those Congolese famine victims.

Thus was initiated the era of the starving African child in humanitarian campaigns. "The tragedy in the Congo burnt the image of the starving African child onto the collective British conscience," a phenomenon that would spiral geographically outward (Black 1992, 63). Two week later, "the story of the famine hit the popular press in an unprecedented way, splashed across four pages of the *Daily Mirror*" (Black 1992, 65). Print media was the vehicle for the dissemination of these images and daily

newspapers' coverage of the story served to attract the readership to the story itself, as well as to the aid efforts underway to alleviate the suffering. Oxfam, its contemporaries, and the media outlets were all mutually benefiting from this coverage. From the spread in the *Mirror*, Oxfam gained promotional material and "ordered 50,000 reprints of the news spread and mailed them to all its supporter groups and donors. The coverage brought a tidal wave of response" (Black 1992, 65).

For the rest of the month of January 1961, Oxfam witnessed a lockstep rise of donations correlated exactly with media coverage of the famine; over £100,000 rushed in directly to benefit the Congo Appeal (Black 1992, 80). As newspapers continued to carry the story, and run it alongside graphic imagery, British citizens continued to give money to the cause. If Oxfam itself had not initiated this strategy, it certainly recognized the gushing well as such. To supplement the coverage, Oxfam took out paid advertising appeals in dailies that replicated and reproduced the photographs (there were also a deluge of appeals that the newspapers ran at no charge to the aid agencies) (Black 1992, 65). Oxfam pressed on in hopes of maintaining this momentum before it receded. With a degree of self-awareness, these images were intended to make the audience "uncomfortable" and even imply a "strong hint of accusation," yet leave an indelible impression nonetheless (Black 1992, 80). A decade prior, Oxfam accounts for £5 received for every £1 spent on advertising—this figure jumps by over six times following the campaign for Congo (Black 1992, 80).

Out of this crisis emerged a relationship between the humanitarian community, media outlets, and graphic coverage of suffering. The response from the public to the atrocity photographs from Congo was a revelation and one that can be singularly traced



to the image: “This massive outpouring of public generosity was something completely new. It came purely from coverage in the newspapers – there were no television pictures; and even the press coverage was modest and the pictures mild by the standards of later African disasters” (Black 1992, 65). The spectacle of suffering that is detailed below is dependent on television as a medium, despite having roots in the pre-TV era. Established in 1960, though, is the audience’s experience of looking as a means through which to connect to the suffering of others. In the case of Congo, and those of Biafra and Ethiopia, looking compelled giving. Along with a check, one Oxfam donor sent a note that read: “No child on earth should look like this” (Black 1992, 66). Without overanalyzing an innocuous , anonymous remark such as this, it is worth recognizing that the donor’s imperative does NOT read: “No child on earth should *live* like this.” This is as if to say, the way the child *appears* to the audience is normatively prior to the way the child actually lives, which in many ways is a telling precursor to the spectacle of the 1990s. Toward the end of the 1960s, however, another African crisis will creep into the consciences of the West and build upon the associations initiated in the Congo.

The civil war in Nigeria, also known as the Biafran War, was brought into Western homes in the form of photographic evidence of the starvation of civilians among the secessionist Igbo people. War photography by Gilles Caron of France, and Don McCullin of the United Kingdom, has come to epitomize the ability for an image to frame a conflict and communicate the desperate predicaments of the subjects of the photo for an unsuspecting audience. Beginning in the Spring of 1968, news of the conflict began to flow to Western news outlets through the reporting of Caron and McCullin. On May 4, 1968, Caron’s photos were published in the *Paris Match*, and were thereafter

syndicated in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (US), *Manchete* (Brazil), and *Kwick* (Germany) (Cookman 2008, 227, 238). On June 12, similar photos were plastered on the cover of *Life* magazine and in *The Sun* (Heerten 2009, 5-6). These photographs have been, over time, elevated to the status of iconic because of their impact on the public and the way in which they have laid the foundation for atrocity coverage to follow.

The images from the region of Biafra portray the debilitating effects of chronic malnutrition on women and children. In a raw fashion they capture the physicality of suffering by focusing the viewer's attention on the extreme toll taken on the body:

In one, a child attempted in vain to suckle his mother's withered breast. In another, a group of naked boys stood intently watching some action...Caron focused on a boy in the front rank, gently grasping a slender stick; its thinness emphasizes the boy's wasted limbs...The other photograph shows a girl of indeterminate age, who seems little more than a tissue of skin stretched tautly across ribs and shoulders. (Cookman 2008, 238)

Effectively, the photographs break down the experience of suffering into its most visceral, human, base form in a way that translates well to an audience. Through the process of mediation, the coverage strikes at the sentimental core of the audience: "Caron humanized his subjects...gave his subjects dignity despite their suffering..." (Cookman 2008, 239). The relationship that photojournalists hope to establish is on the level of emotions—that viewers will respond to the way the images make them feel. Because of the nature of the still snapshot, there are many contextual assumptions that are required of the viewer that cannot be made explicit through the medium.

For instance, there is a presumption of victim innocence in the Biafra coverage that has continued across others cases. The use of women and children as subjects communicates the notion that there are powerful, external forces acting on them, due to

traditional narratives of female and child passivity. Starvation itself is illustrated in simple terms, as a natural disaster, more akin to an earthquake than a calculated political strategy. In the case of Biafra, as well as Ethiopia, this simplicity is in fact a distortion because in both places food was being used as a weapon of war to punish civilian populations. The combination of child-like victim innocence and subsistence rights violation, beginning in 1968, casts a shadow on future incidents of visual media representation of suffering.

However, these “innocent victims” were not merely passive subjects in the frame of the photographs—they were in fact active participants in the global trafficking of their own atrocity images. Under the leadership of Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the secessionist Biafrans employed the services of Markpress, a Geneva-based public relations firm to assist in their marketing and publicity. In addition to seven hundred press releases sent to “British MPs, newspaper editors, radio and television correspondents, businessmen and academics,” Markpress was more generally tasked with casting “the Biafran case in the most heartrending light” (Harrison and Palmer 1986, 22; Black 1992, 121). In the television coverage of 12 June on British outlet Independent Television News (ITN), the figure of three thousand deaths per day was quoted, despite having been drawn from “partisan” sources (Black 1992, 120-121). Ojukwu, aware of the power of the image and of the press, leveraged the “starvation card” to sway British public opinion and hopefully encourage a cessation of support for the Federal government with which the Biafrans were at war (Black 1992, 121).

This proved to be an overwhelmingly successful strategy as the images of starving Biafrans galvanized British civil society and awoke a remarkable, if short-lived,

movement. “The eventual breaking of the famine story provoked a massive popular campaign which began in Britain and spread quickly throughout the west...The pictures of Biafran children clearly touched a sensitive spot...Thousands of people in the west marched, protested and demonstrated, went on hunger strike, collected money, took out whole-page advertisements in newspapers and other opinion-formers” (Harrison and Palmer 1986, 34). Local ‘Support Biafra’ groups surfaced in the UK, Belgium, France, Holland, Ireland and the US, and advocacy editorials appeared in major publications (Harrison and Palmer 1986, 34-35). Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere quipped “If I’d been a Jew in Nazi Germany, I’d feel the same as an Ibo in Nigeria” (Quoted in Harrison and Palmer 1986, 34). The British *Daily Sketch* called Biafra “today’s Belsen” (Harrison and Palmer 1986, 31). While the relevance of Holocaust allusions will return below, it is central to the Nigerian case that the images of famine, as influential as they were, cannot be seen as neutrally filtered throughout the global mass media of the late-1960s. One party to the conflict was able to manipulate the substance to serve their own interests—although humanitarian agencies would also benefit.

Worldwide publication of Caron’s and McCullin’s photographs stirred the conscience of the global public and had a range of cascading effects on the NGO community. Aid agencies, such as Caritas Internationalis and Oxfam, used these images in their print advertising, attempting to play off of empathetic sentiments in their solicitation for donations. Caritas literally reprinted Caron’s photo of a starving baby in their posters (Cookman 2008, 240); Oxfam, cleverly, took out ads in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, that were reluctant to print the brutal photos in their coverage of the crisis (Heerten 2009, 7). Famously, Biafra was the point of origin of Médecins Sans Frontières

(Doctors without Borders, or MSF) when Bernard Kouchner, then a doctor on location with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), refused to maintain his silence in line with the ICRC dictum of neutrality in conflict zones. Kouchner declared the starvation an act of “genocide,” imploring the world to act, and reprimanding all actors for failing to take a stance against the guilty parties in this conflict (de Montclos 2009, 71-72).. The photographic evidence of the humanitarian emergency in Biafra had the effect of spurring public outcry and generating financial contributions to agencies, but also retaining simplistic storylines about the crisis, instead of delving into the political mire.

Visual mediation of the conflict had brought tales of suffering to new sectors of society and, therefore, “from a media point of view, Biafra was a success story, the first major famine to be addressed through media images of starving Africans, before Ethiopia in 1984 or Somalia in 1992” (de Montclos 2009, 72). Photography brought an element of reality to viewers far removed from the crisis. Similar to coverage of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, Biafra jostled a generation from its complacency. The combination of photographs in daily papers and weekly newsmagazines, with the use of stills in the nightly broadcast news, illustrated the depths of the ongoing peril in Biafra for Western affluent classes. Biafra is important in cultural media history because of the way in which African children specifically were featured as subjects of war photography. While many photographs had famously captured historical cases of suffering—from Hiroshima to My Lai—Congo and Biafra introduced the world to African famine using a frame that would be replicated into ubiquity.

### Manifestation of the Spectacle: Ethiopia 1984

When similar images began to emerge in 1984 from the Horn of Africa, Biafra was invoked as the clear predecessor. As discussed in Chapter 2, a BBC report filmed by Mohammed Amin and narrated by correspondent Michael Buerk gripped the audience and motivated a tidal wave of civil society activity culminating in the Live Aid benefit concert. Once again the scene became familiar to audiences: children with swollen bellies and desperately vacant glares, surrounded by swarming flies against a dusty backdrop. Again absent from the narrative were the political dimensions of ethnic conflict and the manipulation of aid delivery by Mengistu Haile Mariam, both key factors in the consequential famine. Imagery was used to tell the story and to expect a certain set of assumptions and responses from the audience; some of these assumptions rest on cultural memory of Biafra, as well as on subtler and more harmful notions of African hopelessness and dependence. Graphic coverage of suffering in Ethiopia assisted with the cultivation of this narrative and the activism that responded to this narrative follows in kind.

Famine alleviation campaigns waged in the mid-1980s, detailed in the previous chapter, evidence the volume of public outcry over the suffering they were witnessing on television. While a central component of these campaigns is the faulty combination of mass consumption and human rights, the visual aspect is also compelling. As television audiences expanded in the 1980s, Ethiopia captivated the attention of viewers with moving images of suffering in progress. Mass media had changed. Previously, “television [had brought] starvation in Biafra to the full attention of millions of viewers, but black-

and-white photographs of starving children, published in newspapers and magazines, were probably more important” (Benthall 1993, 102). While Biafra communicated the still image, Ethiopia put starvation in motion, adding a dimension of immediacy that photographs are unable to translate. Ethiopia became a worldwide cause célèbre because, due to the cultural memory of past famines, viewers were already prepared to absorb imagery of starving Africans and to accept certain claims about the issue (presumed innocence, appropriate remedies, etc.). However, the repetitious nature of starving African children on television created a context in which, while an audience could be temporarily shocked especially due to the timeliness of the coverage, it could not be surprised. As these images became commonplace in print advertisements and television commercials for causes and organizations, their effect on the audience was transformative.

For the audience member, just a flash of an image of an African child on television conjures memories of Congo, Biafra, Ethiopia, famine, and charity. Observers remark on the ascent of this image in the public psyche with overlapping language: “By the mid-nineteen-sixties...the powerful image of the starving African child with haunting eyes and skeletal limbs had become a universal icon of human suffering” (Cohen 2001, 178); “Starving children are the famine icon” (Moeller 1999, 98). But, what does it mean for an image of suffering to become “iconic”? Does it mean that starving children symbolize all suffering and give suffering children voice and visibility? Does it mean that all people think the same way when the image appears before them? Does the image provoke the same response in all contexts? Ultimately, from a human rights perspective, the question is what is the effect of icon status on the dignity of the subject? Is the

Congolese, Biafran, Ethiopian or Somali child merely a *symbol* of something to someone, or a real human being who deserves treatment and care to protect her dignity? Or has she been reduced to a symbol, whose worth is limited to her ability to generate public attention and donations? The answers to these questions are wrapped up in the contradictions inherent in the spectacle of suffering.

Suffering on television had become a normalized feature of nightly news with questionable resonance in the minds of the audience. The spectacle of suffering is that which traffics in the spectacular nature of its subject, while influencing the response of the witness. The fact that a story or crisis becomes ordinary to the viewer does not entail that it does not maintain relevance or weight—many things that are ordinary are still essential, such as paying rent or filling the car with gas. To argue that repetition in the media correlates directly to “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999) or some other syndrome or deficit is to discount the response that is provoked by graphic imagery of suffering; even in the saturated media environment of the post-cold war period, public clamor for humanitarianism has been vociferous. The most crucial point of critique, however, is the content and duration of the clamor: what is being called for, by whom, and how persistent is the protest? “Starving children unequivocally attract notice, but the repetition of their image suggests that all that is needed to resolve the crisis is food. Feed the children and the famine will be over” (Moeller 1999, 99). If this cynical view is accurate, then somehow the visual representation of suffering has a direct impact on the content of the advocacy that is generated. If graphic imagery of suffering provokes a blip on the radar of public opinion, similar to a hurricane or celebrity scandal, then Debordian critique of spectacle is exonerated. This demonstration would give credence to the claim



that the spectacle of suffering merely objectifies the other and paralyzes compassionate observers from acting. But, if the spectacle motivates activism on behalf of human rights protection, then the tale of the spectacle of suffering is more complicated, as presented by the early instances of intervention in the post-cold war era.

From the Congo and Biafra to Ethiopia and Somalia, we witness an expanding role of the image in prompting a civil society response and a growing intensity in the response. It is my contention that this trajectory is attributed to changes in the technological capacity for communication, as well as the cultural associations that are nurtured over time through the repetition of atrocity. However, until the end of the cold war, starvation was treated as remediable through donation and provision of aid. As we will see in Somalia, coverage of child malnourishment on the Horn of Africa did not produce a telethon or pledge drive; instead, military intervention was initiated that expanded into a nation-building exercise. Distinguishing this episode from those that preceded it is the heightened media context and the means used to alleviate suffering of others. If Congo and Biafra were carried in print media, and Ethiopia by abbreviated television reports, Somalia is the African famine that occurred live, in real time, and unfolded before the public for all to experience simultaneously. The frenzied and frenetic pace at which events occurred in this case is metaphor for the rapidly shifting public opinion that shaped and was shaped by the media coverage.

#### Emergence of the Spectacle: Somalia 1991

Much has been written and said about the humanitarian intervention in Somalia in the twenty years since it took place. The state remains essentially failed and plagued by violent turf wars. Two decades of incapable governance has provided a safe haven for

terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda, as well as the homegrown organization, al Shabab. Piracy, the scourge of centuries past has returned in the Gulf of Aden as local opportunists attempt to make a life for themselves amidst an otherwise stagnant economy, yet at the expense of others. All the while, Somali civilians remain squeezed between hardcore Islamist ideologies and geopolitical battles waged intermittently on its shores. The country remains an incredibly dangerous place, a policymaker's worst nightmare, and the situation is as ripe today for chronic famine as it was before the fall of the country's last government in 1991.

"Operation: Restore Hope," as the US intervention was termed, is a crucial landmark in the checkered history of humanitarian intervention in the post-cold war era. The debate surrounding Somalia generally consists of two central questions: what was the media's role in motivating the intervention, and what was the subsequent effect on the West's response to mass atrocity? With advancements in ICT and the innovation of the twenty-four-hour cable news network, viewers witnessed these events in real-time, and foreign policy appeared to shift in lock-step with media coverage and public opinion: As images appeared of famine-stricken children, the public called for intervention; as these images were replaced by those of dead American officers the following year, the tenor swung to withdrawal. The blowback from Somalia negatively affected the ability of human rights advocates to lobby governments for humanitarian intervention, for fear of making a repeated spectacle out of the deaths of their own soldiers. The CNN Effect, as it was termed, was an attempt by commentators to describe the role played by media coverage of the event in driving foreign policy.

However, when social science caught up with the commentators, the CNN Effect was largely debunked (Robinson 2002; Western 2005). The most convincing evidence of its inaccuracy is the simple sequencing of events. In late 1991, news of the famine in Somalia came into view on Western television screens, mostly as part of a larger story about famine on the Horn of Africa. *Africa Watch* reported “wanton and indiscriminate” violence in the fallout from the government collapse (quoted in Western 2005, 139). Major news coverage would not return until late summer 1992, even though international organizations (IOs) and human rights groups would continue their alarm-sounding advocacy. In July 1992, the International Committee for the Red Cross cited the figures of 300,000 casualties from famine since 1989, and “reiterated its six-month old estimates that 95 percent of the population of Somalia was malnourished” (Western 2005, 135). The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) “estimated that as many as 4.5 million of the country’s 6 million civilians would be subject to death by starvation without some form of immediate assistance” (Western 2005, 139). While reporting from IOs does not often reach the average news consumer, inside the US administration, there were officials such as Andrew Natsios, also advocating forcefully for intervention. Natsios, then-assistant administrator of the US Agency for International Development (UNAID), sought to make the crisis more public with a series of press conferences on the topic of the “humanitarian catastrophe” (Western 2005, 135). Yet, with all this discussion, there was very little graphic coverage of the famine in Somalia. Most news outlets had pulled out due to insecurity and it was not until the Bush administration chose to make the famine an issue that media sources began covering it.

Still, the fact that there was an ongoing debate between IOs, state department officials, the Pentagon, and the Executive is not a mass media matter. However, nearly simultaneously, news emerged from the Balkans and reports of concentration camps in Europe stole the headlines temporarily. The duration of the summer of 1992, the Bush administration was mired in calls from all sides to intervene somewhere: either in Somalia, or in Bosnia. Photographs of concentration camps in Bosnia had surfaced and the human rights community demanded action. While the conflict in Bosnia and the role of imagery in that intervention will be analyzed in detail below, its relationship to the decision-making vis-à-vis Somalia is critical. As described in some detail by Nicholas Wheeler (2000), Samantha Power (2007), and Jon Western (2005), the Bush Administration, facing pressure from a range of external and internal sources, ultimately executed the proverbial bait-and-switch. On August 14, President George H.W. Bush authorized a military airlift of food aid, as well as of the Pakistani guards representing the UN security force (Moeller 1999, 135). “The decision to launch the airlift to Somalia did divert media and liberal attention away from critical coverage and commentary on Bosnia and to sympathetic stories on Somalia...The airlift had given the administration a slight reprieve from the pressure on Bosnia” (Western 2005, 163). This calculated move helped “deflect attention away from...inaction over Bosnia” (Wheeler 2000, 181), which was seen as a much more difficult conflict and a less favorable context for intervention, and mobilized the press corps to cover Somalia in full stride. By initiating the airlift, “the White House saw an opportunity to demonstrate it had a heart...and do it relatively cheaply” (Samantha Power 2007, 286).

From late-summer 1992 through the fall, Somalia was the humanitarian story covered by all outlets. “Television and the print media were on the spot sending wrenching stories back to the United States. Stories on and photographs of the famine’s victims, heroes and villains became ubiquitous. The tales of woe—especially of child victims—led the coverage on air and in print” (Moeller 1999, 137). Pleads for further and more sustained action occupied the editorial pages, as calls escalated from aid delivery to a more extended presence and a revised set of rules of engagement. Philip Johnston, President of CARE-US, as well as other officers from that organization, continued his vocal calls until the “drumbeat for intervention reached its crescendo” (de Waal 1997, 185). In September, US Marines were deployed to support the airlift mission, while concurrently newsmagazine carried stories with graphic imagery of starving children. Somali supermodel Iman and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Katherine Hepburn made trips to the country (Moeller 1999, 140). Of all the grief and suffering on the Horn of Africa (or elsewhere, for that matter), Somalia had clearly arrived.

Yet, contrary to popular opinion, upon close inspection, public attention and media coverage *followed* official policy decision-making, *not vice versa*. The calculations of the Bush administration, especially following his electoral defeat at the hands of Bill Clinton, consisted of the expectation that the public supported and would continue to support military activity in Somalia on behalf of humanitarianism. By effectively mobilizing the media to cover stories of the famine, the Administration could maintain the storyline: “...media coverage enabled humanitarian intervention by ensuring domestic legitimacy...” (Wheeler 2000, 180). With US interests being affected by the introduction of troops, and the emotional narrative of starving children, public support

would help President Bush set himself up for a memorable legacy. Furthermore, Bush bore responsibility for the plight of Kurds following Operation Desert Storm, so Somalia helped to alleviate the pressure from the public on Iraq. Slowly, over the course of the fall, the storyline shifted from the starving children and aid delivery to the more heroic, patriotic vision of the role of US troops and the thuggish locals (Moeller 1999, 138). However, despite the rousing support for the troops among the American public, “it was not easy for the administration to control the subsequent coverage, which focused on the fact that over 1,000 Somalis were dying daily” (Wheeler 2000, 179). The spectacle enabled by the administration’s decision to intervene—and on which it depended—would become the bane of the mission.

The night before Thanksgiving 1992 the shape of the mission changed when outgoing-President Bush, with President-Elect Clinton’s approval, declared he would send 15,000-30,000 troops to bolster the UN mission. At that announcement, civil society awoke to the cause. Relief organizations saw a remarkable response in donations, and media outlets began to position teams on the scene to cover the next stage of the intervention. However, unlike late summer, the facts on the ground would not be allowed to drive the story; there would be more coordination from the center. On December 8, Marines landed on the shores of Mogadishu to be greeted by journalists and cameras (estimates range anywhere from 75-300 news personnel on scene). The Pentagon had arranged for these media representatives to be on site by issuing invitations, and even positioned them appropriately (Moeller 1999, 143; Keenan 2004, 440). Reminiscent within Western cultural memory of the landing on Normandy Beach in World War II, the Somali expedition was designed to be a display of American power and intentionality in

the post-cold war period, a controlled environment in which to make such a pronouncement, and mediated to an extreme so as to message the event clearly to enemies and allies alike. As dazed as the Marines were to be welcomed with conspicuous television studio lighting, US forces would be faced with an equally jolting reality when the same cameras would capture their exit months later.

Coverage of the landing boosted television news ratings to their highest since the 1991 Gulf War (Moeller 1999, 143). Public opinion of the intervention was extremely favorable, with 81 percent supportive of the mission from a moral position and 70 percent willing to sacrifice American blood and treasure for the cause (Moeller 1999, 145). The spectacle of Somalia had been transformed from that of suffering to that of militaristic heroism in a way that resonated with the audience and generated support for the Administration's goals: humanitarian, political, and geopolitical. Messaging through visualization was being controlled in a masterful way. Media outlets were reaping profits through an increase in television viewership and in print sales. All parties were content to continue behind the mission in Somalia because all of their interests were being well served. However, the unfolding of events will test the limits of spin and what results will demonstrate the difficulty in managing image in an age of spectacle. As public opinion turned against the mission, the US government learned the lesson of the fickle nature of the audience for humanitarian expeditions.

By early 1993, with the end of drought and resumption of the rainy season, the famine was effectively over, making it a "straightforward task to declare victory over starvation" (Moeller 1999, 145; de Waal 1997, 185). While the original impetus for intervention had been alleviated, the mission evolved rapidly to respond to facts on the

ground. In the summer of 1993, aid delivery was no longer the force's *raison d'être*. Due to an escalation in violence, prompted by attacks against the Pakistani peacekeepers, the militarized humanitarian expedition took on a singularly military function. Infamously, in the fall of that year, American forces faced significant opposition from troops under the command of General Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the President of Somalia. On September 25, a US helicopter was downed in Mogadishu and on October 3 two more helicopters were shot down over the capital. The second attack resulted in eighteen US Army Rangers killed, one taken captive, and one of the bodies of the deceased dragged through the streets by children (Moeller 1999, 146). Fallout from the transmission of photographs of the fierce battle and brutal treatment of American casualties was immediate and dramatic. President Bill Clinton pledged a withdrawal of American troops from the UN mission in direct response. Graphic imagery of suffering had provoked a change in foreign policy, but the suffering subjects in this case were not African children—they were American servicemen acting on humanitarian grounds. While thousands of Somalis were dead or wounded when the dust settled in Mogadishu, their suffering had been cast aside in favor of the American narrative. This narrative was driven by lingering symptoms of the Vietnam Syndrome, in which the nation's military gets bogged down in a quagmire. Of course, the Vietnam Syndrome would give way to a "Somalia Syndrome" that framed the West's approach to Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo (Brooks 2006).

Humanitarian intervention in Somalia exposed the human rights commitments of the audience as superficial, fleeting, and self-fulfilling. In the early stages, calls for compassionate foreign policy on behalf of starving Africans were founded on the emotional response to photographic documentation of suffering. With the history of



caring and giving in the Biafran and Ethiopian contexts, but without the geopolitical constraints of the cold war, Somalia became the example of what a force-forward human rights foreign policy could look like. While few observers would claim American or UN victory in Somalia, many detractors in hindsight will issue conclusions about how the intervention would have worked if only it had been executed with a limited set of rules of engagement; if the mission had not changed, then international forces could have exited on their own terms, having restored the country to some semblance of normalcy and halted the most chronic forms of suffering. Similar to the way in which “Operation: Provide Comfort” in 1991 effectively set up safe zones for Kurdish refugees, without attempting anything further, a modest strategy of civilian protection absent the aggressive military adventure after Aidid may have been a recipe for success. However, counterfactuals aside, human rights and humanitarianism were struck a severe setback in the aftermath of Somalia. As Bosnia crept back into public debate, the reluctance for and resistance to taking action was especially poignant.

### **The Bosnian Genocide in Prime Time**

#### **Concentration Camps Return to Europe**

The military debacle in Somalia was, in important ways, a consequence of the American government having to choose between two conflicting humanitarian crises, on the Horn of Africa and in the Balkans. During the summer of 1992, while a debate was bubbling about intervention in Somalia, news and then pictures emerged of grizzly detention camps in southern Europe where Bosnian Muslims were being held at the behest of Serbian forces. When Slobodan Milosevic, an ethnic Serb, assumed power over the country of Yugoslavia through election and advanced a pro-Serb platform, the

ethnically diverse sub-regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia, became uneasy as hypernationalism laid the foundation for the Milosevic platform. Following the secession of the latter three, the Yugoslav National Army, under Milosevic, began attacks on the regions hoping to quell their rebelliousness. Unable to corral Slovenia, but having routed Croatia, Bosnia became the next target. Nearly half of Bosnia was Muslim, making it the most diverse of the Yugoslav republics. Despite the fact that the US and European Community recognized the newly-independent Bosnia, the arms embargo enacted on all of Yugoslavia at the outset of violence crippled Bosnia in its war with Serb forces. On the offensive, Milosevic's army laid siege to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, and began its ethnic cleansing campaign of captured territories in the spring of 1992 (Moeller 1999, 263-4).

Two months later, an American journalist, Roy Gutman, began to pursue the facts behind circulating rumors about detention camps in Bosnia. On July 19, *Newsday* published a story on the existence of such a camp at Omarska, although without photographs and without eyewitness testimony. Two days later, another article by Gutman is entitled "Like Auschwitz" (Samantha Power 2007, 272). Two weeks after the initial article, however, Gutman tracked down two former detainees from Omarska and Brcko Luka who agreed to appear in photos. On July 29, *The Guardian* expands on Gutman's reporting in a story by Maggie O'Kane on camps at Omarska, Trnopolje, and Bratunac. On August 2, Gutman's follow-up story ran with the unmistakable headline "Death Camps." These accounts evidenced a strategy of systematic execution of detainees at the camps that peaked the attention of the global public. Even before the famous images are disseminated, journalist Christiane Amanpour frames the Bosnian

camps for the first time in terms of the World War II genocide perpetrated by the Nazis in Europe (Moeller 1999, 266-7).

When pre-image news broke, Bosnian Serb party leader Radovan Karadzic was in London on a diplomatic mission. In order to counter these initial reports, Karadzic caves and permits limited access to the ICRC and the media. Producers from the Independent Television News enter Omarska under Serb supervision on August 5. “Allowed into the canteen, the journalists saw wafer-thin men with shaven heads eating water bean stew...But they were not allowed to visit the prisoners’ sleeping quarters or the notorious ‘White House,’ which they had heard was a veritable human abattoir” (Samantha Power 2007, 275). Without explicit photographs of what they had expected to find, the team departs Omarska. It was clear these prisoners were not well fed, but, due to the war in progress, it was possible that the detainees were criminals, dissidents, or battlefield conquests (it was not initially obvious that ALL the detainees were innocent Muslims, cleansed from their homes and villages). However, upon their exit, the caravan passed by the camp at Trnopolje coincidentally as new prisoners were arriving, appearing worn and haggard. The camera operators sprung from the car and began filming from the outside of the camp, with the barbed wire as foreground. The night of August 6, ITN broadcasts footage from Trnopolje that is simulcast on CNN and ABC, marking the turning point for Bosnia *qua* news story. “Being the first visual evidence of the camps’ place in the Bosnian Serbs’ ethnic cleansing strategy, and the first accounts by outsiders of the conditions in these camps, the ITN reports caused a considerable stir” (Campbell 2002a, 4).

The morning of August 7, the front pages of newspapers throughout the West were plastered with these now-iconic photographs. British press headlines rang clear; *Daily Mail* declares “The Proof,” while *Daily Mirror* was even more provocative with the unsubtle “Belsen 92” (Campbell 2002a, 2-3). Both of these dailies featured prominently a prisoner by the name of Fikret Alic, situated in the center of the frame, with especially stark physical attributes: waste drawn in, wrists skeletal, ribs protruding.<sup>3</sup> Within two weeks, Alic and his fellow detainees were subjects of global news broadcasts, and on covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines (Campbell 2002a, 1). It was these photographs in the late-summer of 1992 that galvanized the public, and forced decision-makers to confront the specter of genocide in Europe fifty years after the declarations of “Never Again” were first made. “The images of wilting Muslims behind barbed wire concentrated grassroots and elite attention and inflamed public outrage about the war like no postwar genocide” (Samantha Power 2007, 276). As policy makers struggled to gain traction in a conflict in which nobody wanted to be involved, civil society cries grew louder.

The fervor over the images “...confronted Bush officials with the challenge not of how to deal with the reemergence of concentration camps in Europe but rather how to

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<sup>3</sup> Professor David Campbell, in a two-part series for *Journal of Human Rights* (2002b; 2002a), details the legal battle between ITN and *Living Marxism*, a journal critical of ITN’s coverage and alleging that these photos were inaccurate representations of reality. Their claim was that it was the camera that was on the inside of the barbed wire and not the prisoners because there was no fence around Trnopolje. The bizarre libel trial involved testimony from former detainees, as well as members of the press, and resulted in the judge siding with ITN against the allegations made in the pages of *Living Marxism*. Much of the courtroom debate, as Campbell argues, had the effect of muting the public perception of the terror perpetrated against inhabitants of Trnopolje that included mass rape and torture in favor of the dispute over the photo.

withstand the political pressures arising from the televised images of them. Concentration camps a half-century after the Nazis would have been enough, but *pictures* of the emaciated, tortured prisoners: this was the sort of thing that stirred the lethargic and fickle American public” (Danner 1991, 2). President Bush was able to assuage public fear by calling for—and achieving—access to the camps for the Red Cross. Following Red Cross visits, many of the most severe detention facilities of the early phase of the war were closed. While this can be seen as a human rights victory, more critically it can be reasoned that this “victory” for the Bush administration sealed off further policy options toward Bosnia going forward. No decision makers took seriously the claims that the Serbs were genocidal and were able to ignore those calls having “solved” the problem of the camps with their closure. Obscuring the larger strategy for the specific mechanisms of camps, allegations of systematic torture and concentrated rape camps were dismissed as unsubstantiated. The pressure that had mounted to act in Bosnia was allayed because *something* had been done, namely the camps on television were closed.

On August 13, the UN Security Council, with US backing, authorized delivery of humanitarian aid to Bosnia, but failed to address the question of camps (Samantha Power 2007, 281). There were people suffering under siege in Sarajevo and peacekeepers were bolstered to protect civilians, but not to dismantle or intervene in the system of concentration camps. Public pressure was applied in the form of official statements to allow international agencies access to the camps and to the suffering people there, but that was as far as any one would venture (Samantha Power 2007, 279). There were resignations over US inaction within the State Department, and communications officers attempted to create space for flexible policymaking without committing to any position;

thus, the imperative not to declare Serbian aggression as an act of genocide—a position taken by Helsinki Watch in the same month in a 359-page report on atrocities, edited by Executive Director Aryeh Neier, the research for which began in March (Samantha Power 2007, 257). David Rieff refers to this policy—of authorizing humanitarian aid delivery, without forceful protection of civilians and repulsion of Serbian brutality—as “substituting relief for rescue” (Rieff 2003, 149). In the same way Somalia would become a massive distraction from the problems in Bosnia, this limited attempt to deflect responsibility relied on the short-attention span of the television audience. As agitated as civil society had become, and as vociferous as were its cries, the vast expanse between the dramatic Holocaust comparisons and the weakness of political will signifies a persistent contradiction produced by the spectacle: appearance can serve as a substitute for action.

### Shadow of the Holocaust in the Age of Intervention

The ITN footage immediately conjured memories of the Nazi genocide perpetrated against Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, communists and other political dissidents. This connection was at once clear to the average viewer, as well as facilitated by the media’s framing of the subject matter. Coverage such as the piece in the *Daily Mirror* that utilized the headline “Belsen 92” even placed a WWII photo next to that from Bosnia, in order to make the linkage beyond skepticism. Two of the most obvious points of comparison that resonated with the audience were the genocide’s geographic location in Europe and the scenes of starving bodies behind barbed wire. The location introduced geopolitical considerations, and the imagery had the dramatic effect of playing on

emotional and cultural memory. While the spectacle of suffering that became manifest in the case of Bosnia underwrote the viewer's emotional response to the sight of human suffering, the backdrop of the Holocaust presented an additional element. In much the same way that Biafra and Ethiopia contributed to the reaction to Somalia, the cultural memory of Nazi atrocities was a central motivating factor in the public's outrage in 1992. In a heightened fashion relative to the Somalia case, Bosnia demonstrates the force of striking imagery combined with historical metaphor in framing contemporary crises and shaping audience perception.

There is no association of greater magnitude than a comparison to the Holocaust: it is the gold standard of good *and* evil, against which all things are measured. No mission is of higher moral character than that undertaken by Allied Forces in dismantling Hitler's war machine. No political objective is as despised as the Final Solution. No act more naïve or cowardly than that of appeasement. No analogy more damning or demonizing than being termed Nazi, Fascist, or like Hitler; also, no analogy more alarmist or overwrought. For such a dynamic event to become the model of hyperbole speaks to its significance, as well as to the impression its legacy has made on the culture. "The Holocaust has been appropriated as a cultural icon unequivocal in its meaning. To apply the term to a situation is to make an imperative – and sensational – statement" (Moeller 1999, 22). The Holocaust is treated with such gravity so as to occupy a space beyond reach. It is the "ultimate metaphor," the "archetypal case," and the unambiguous essence of (im)morality in contemporary political discourse (Moeller 1999, 273; Zelizer 1998, 210). But, this says nothing of the truth-value of such a comparison or its usefulness in the making of public policy.

Metaphor and imagery of Holocaust, however, did not initially coincide with action. As some activists called for military intervention early on, elite decision makers could be content to have enacted sanctions, closed several camps, and airlifted supplies into Serb territory—treating a genocide as a humanitarian disaster, evidencing a suspicious trend in modern politics. “Rony Brauman of MSF once remarked bitterly that if Auschwitz were taking place today, he feared that both humanitarians and the mass media would choose to describe it as a humanitarian crisis” (Rieff 2003, 75). Discussing the plight of Kurdish refugees, two years prior to Omarska, Peter Galbraith echoes Brauman, “I suppose your solution to Auschwitz would have been to ensure that some Swedish girls in shorts would have been available to give the Jews food!” (Samantha Power 2007, 240). The widening gap between rhetoric and action—and even the transformation of the reality of aggression into deprivation—is a symptom of the spectacle: “...the story of Bosnia is that of images which might have signified genocide or aggression or calculated political struggle seemed for so long to signify only tragedy or disaster or human suffering...and hence were available for inscription or montage in a humanitarian rather than a political response” (Keenan 2002, 559). The space created by spectacle is one in which disconnected realities can coexist without friction; and, the spectacle itself, as it tends to fictionalize reality through mediation, cultivates the nonsensical.

In applying the Holocaust moniker in the Bosnian context, a moral and legal obligation is set upon observers and policymakers. The Holocaust references were knee-jerk reactions to the imagery on television and not reasoned political positions. Driven by emotions of empathy and fear, the comparisons were understandable reactions to



alarming photography. Setting Bosnia apart, however, was the ability to apply the metaphor in real-time. Unlike Belsen and Buchenwald, Omarska was a problem in progress—not just an historical case to muse over and philosophize about in hindsight. However, the immediacy of the conflict is only experienced by the public to the extent it is represented through images. Yet, despite the panic in the media, the cries were loud, but empty, and would soon vanish altogether. A central tension in this early phase of the Bosnian genocide is the juxtaposition of the extreme nature of the metaphor deployed against the narrow prescriptions that emerged. Another glaring consequence of the spectacle of suffering is how quickly and to what degree images propel crisis onto the global stage, as well as how quickly they recede—and in the interim, the issue can range in importance from dire to irrelevant.

The spectacle envelops the audience in contradiction by at once galvanizing public attention through ghastly images, while simultaneously commanding an incoherent response. Holocaust analogy ceases to be rational when description fails to lead to suitable follow through. When a circumstance is compared to the worst evil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but results in the same outcome as does an earthquake, the lessons of genocide have been forgotten and the logic of genocide response rendered impotent. Humanitarianism was used, in the early phase of Bosnia, as a political tool and the spectacle of suffering covered as a smoke screen. The US and UN policy toward the camps were reliant on the public's acquiescence to the policy's limits. Had the audience mobilized in support of a more direct challenge to Milosevic's aggression, the delivery of aid would not have registered as sufficient. However, the spectacle is by definition an apolitical environment and therefore conditions apolitical mobilization. Graphic imagery

of suffering drives emotional outpouring for action, but without guiding principles or political consciousness.

For this reason, racially-motivated, forced removal and detention of peoples can be equated with natural disaster. Politics and intentionality are removed. Yet, all suffering people are not the same and all circumstances that lead to suffering are not equal. The audience can feel like a participant in global affairs as it watches and compares Bosnia to Nazi-occupied Europe, but the spectacle does not allow the comparison to persist beyond that. The spectacle of suffering rests on the fact that the uniformity of subject matter (suffering) transmitted through a uniform medium (television) will affect the audience in a uniform way (empathy)—thus eliminating the opportunity for recipients to parse facts and history, and reason through a crisis to generate a political response. In the absence of a sustained and grounded reaction from the audience, human rights concerns (like war crimes) are dealt with as humanitarian crises (like famine), despite their distinct causes and remedies. Everything bleeds together into an amalgam of disaster and misery. In this confusion, opportunities are missed and problems misdiagnosed. However, the story of the genocide in Bosnia does not end with the news of the camps, and the public and its decision makers will act to aid those under fire, but not before all other options, and hope itself, fade away.

### Sarajevo, Srebrenica, and the Hall of Mirrors

Three months prior to the exposure of concentration camps, the Breadline Massacre of May 1992 struck at the consciences of Western audiences. Coverage of “scenes of dismembered and maimed civilians” stirred the public and “led Bush to

support imposing economic sanctions,” in the administration’s earliest response to the war (Danner 2009, 173). As residents of Sarajevo stood waiting for rations, a Serb mortar shell crashed down, killing seventeen and wounding many more. Newspapers and observers at the time debated whether in fact it even was a Serb attack, as opposed to a self-inflicted Muslim bombing aimed at garnering international sympathy for their cause. This type of reasoning continued throughout the war. As the Siege of Sarajevo took form, Serb propaganda and Western elites argued that Muslim hillside resisters were responsible for the daily sniping at Sarajevan civilians. Bosniaks were not entirely innocent victims in the conflict because their resistance forces were significant, fought bravely, and at times acted with indiscriminate brutality rivaled only by their Serbian enemies. Attacks on civilians were common as columns of Bosniak forces would descend from the forest on unsuspecting villages, raze the buildings, and force civilians to flee for their lives. For this reason, among others, Holocaust comparisons do not adequately illustrate the complex nature of the war and its actors. However, to reason from these scenarios that the Muslims would shell their own people simply to earn global sympathy credit is unreasonable and out of line with the facts (Danner 2009, 180-183).

As Milosevic’s forces, under the command of the vicious Ratko Mladic, marched across the countryside, villages were cleansed of Muslim inhabitants who were either detained or killed, or sought refuge into an increasingly small number of towns in the east. The refugees were unknowingly falling into the Serbian strategy of splitting off remote sites and controlling access to and from places such as Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Zepa, Gorazde, and Tuzla. As these villages swelled with refugees, conditions quickly diminished. Resources cut off and vulnerable to constant attack, these areas were little

more than decrepit refugee camps. However, as the towns degenerated as they did, television crews were on the scene transmitting regular accounts of suffering and torment. With the UN floundering to address the plight of the refugees, the remaining Muslim enclaves were termed “safe areas” and declared under the auspices of “blue helmet” peacekeeping forces. This distinction now in place, the populations found solace in the international acknowledgement of their suffering. While the drama maintained a steady simmer following the concentration camp flare up in 1992, a series of two instances of acute harm and graphic disaster would once again jolt the Western audience into paying attention: the Marketplace Massacre and the fall of Srebrenica.

By this point, the American administration turned over and Candidate Bill Clinton, who had been so vocal about a force-forward policy toward Bosnia, was now President Clinton, being held to account for his campaign promises. Clinton’s election season posturing had been effective in scoring foreign policy points over President Bush, who undeniably had more experience in this area than Clinton. As the images rained down on American viewers, touting himself as savior of Bosnia created space between Clinton and Bush who was reluctant to commit to any substantial policy. However, besides the continuation of aid airlifts, American position vis-à-vis the Bosnian genocide was unchanged. “Bill Clinton had managed to shape the perfect policy: a rhetorical policy, one consisting solely of words. It brought moral credit; it carried no risk...speaking out against inhumanity seemed a means to avoid standing up to it” (Danner 2009, 195). Therefore, the President could remain popular among liberals, human rights supporters, and those concerned with genocide without having to act on it.

Once again, rhetoric and action, as far from one another as they were, co-existed comfortably.

On February 5, 1994 in Sarajevo, “...a 120-millimeter mortar shell plunged earthward in an impossibly perfect trajectory...its five pounds of high explosive spewing out red-hot shrapnel and sending corrugated metal shards slicing through the crowd; in an eye-blink a thick forest of chattering, gossiping, bartering people had been cut down” (Danner 2009, 203). Of the daily terror lived by the inhabitants of this once-great city, the magnitude of this attack hit the newswires with considerable force. Because the Siege was being covered regularly, those journalists in the town readily captured this spike in violence. “Now large glass lenses—more and more of them bobbing and glinting as ever more cameramen pushed their way into the tiny square—would make those words flesh. A few hundred miles away Germans and French would press a button on a remote control and confront overwhelming gore...” (Danner 2009, 205). Blood spattered pavement, scattered limbs, women shrieking: these were the scenes beamed into homes of secure people in other countries. The single worst atrocity in the war thus far, in which sixty-eight Sarajevans perished, was captured in raw feed.

Immediately, in the wake of the attack, two concurrent debates unfolded: who was to blame for the attack, and what had been the merit of the “safe haven” distinction? As with the Breadline Massacre, the Serb propaganda machinery unleashed a torrent of objections and claims that this one too was self-inflicted. Not only did UN authorities begin investigating the trajectory of damage and analyze bloodstain patterns (one of their reports actually concluded that it *could* have been carried out by Muslims), but TV Pale, a Serb broadcast network, produced a “Phil Donohue style” television show with a host, a

panel of experts, and visual aids to debunk the accusation that the Serbs had perpetrated the marketplace bombing (Danner 2009, 217). Incomprehensibly, even the truth-value of an event that was witnessed in real time was in play. Conspiratorial retellings of violence, whose scars were still gaping, were treated as levelheaded possibilities. Imaging, messaging, and spinning, in the age of spectacle, all took the place of truth and reality.

However, in some ways, regardless of who had actually lobbed the mortar, the UN had previously declared Sarajevo “safe,” a label that, following the attack, was seriously called into question. “Amid the human wreckage of this sun-filled square, what could the phrase possibly mean?...Now, amid the stench of cordite in Sarajevo’s Markela [marketplace]... ‘safe area’ meant very little. It was a pretense—a policy of gesture, made solely of words” (Danner 2009, 205). Between Clinton’s rhetoric and the UN’s “gesture,” there is an apparent trend running through the treatment of the genocide as something beyond apathy or reluctance. Critical inquiry suggests that the politics surrounding Bosnia, while volatile, would tolerate a degree of buck-passing shrouded in benevolence. So long as key actors successfully *appeared* as if they cared, and could convince the audience of such with rhetoric and gesture, the projected image of themselves could float by unscathed. While the Marketplace Massacre was a challenge to this position, the gravest abuse was still to come and no Western actor would withstand “the gravest single act of genocide in the Bosnian war” without bearing some responsibility—Srebrenica tested the limits of the spectacle and the ability of the audience to maintain its distance from the images on television (Samantha Power 2007, 393).

Due to the willful self-delusion of the West as to the gravity of the Serb aggression, beginning in 1992 with Omarsa and continuing through 1994, Srebrenica

crept up on the audience and the foreign policy community. Having learned a valuable lesson from the exposure of the camps early on, Karadzic and Mladic slow-played the final move to cleanse the remaining Muslim enclaves; moving swiftly was more likely to provoke attention and reaction as it had in 1992. Into 1995, the Serb forces choked off all relief convoys and even airlifts had proved ineffective. By July, Mladic had surrounded Srebrenica on all sides and began to separate men from women and children, to “screen” Muslim men for their involvement in war crimes—or so the Western media reported (Samantha Power 2007, 404). On July 11, the day the Serbs assumed control over the enclave, after meeting with the incompetent Dutch peacekeeping force tasked to protect the safe area, Mladic strolled through town with his own cameras to document the conquest. He toasted with Dutch Lieutenant Colonel Thom Karremans, commandant of the UN presence in Srebrenica and was “clearly in a celebratory mood” (Flottau and Mayr 2011). Mladic sauntered through the streets of Srebrenica handing out chocolate to Muslim children, “‘No one will be harmed...’ the Bosnian Serb commander said on July 12, 1995, gently patting a young boy on the head. ‘You have nothing to fear. You will all be evacuated’” (Rohde and Burns 2011). Smoking a cigar and flashing a bold smile, Mladic mugged for his own cameras, as well as those he knew would transmit the event to audiences far away. The brilliance of the Serbian leadership was its tactfulness in perpetrating a genocide in front of live television cameras and, with a cigar and a smile, tell the audience it was not happening.

Over the course of one week, Srebrenica would be emptied with unrelenting brutality. What proceeded to occur, under the watchful eye of Western satellite imaging and spy drones, was a mass murder of over seven thousand men and boys, and the mass

rapes of the women—long an evil signature of the Serb military and paramilitary. While American policymakers stammered to address what they certainly knew was happening, the struggle was to comprehend the thoroughness of the operation. Despite the years of Holocaust metaphor and alarmism surrounding the war, nothing approximated the reality of the situation on the ground. If cultural memory through imagery had informed popular opinion of Bosnia, it had done so at the peril of the victims. We could imagine how to deal with someone like Hitler, because we dealt with Hitler once before. However, it became impossible to imagine, or be creative, or dynamic, about possible futures. The spectacle of suffering had circumscribed our understanding of the genocide in progress with the historical and visual framing.

By late July 1995, news and images from refugee testimony and media coverage flowed from the region. “Muslims described to the American media rapes and throat-slitting carried out before their eyes. The major newspapers and television outlets brimmed with graphic depictions of Serb butchery” (Samantha Power 2007, 413). In a particularly telling instance, the *Washington Post* ran a cover photo of a young girl hanging by her neck from a tree, having committed suicide after being raped (Samantha Power 2007, 413). As images of mass graves surfaced, evidencing the extent of the act that had occurred, observers and audiences endeavored to come to terms with the suffering that had so quickly and so fatally been perpetrated. What was problematically clear was that the case of Bosnia and the episode at Srebrenica could not be written off as having happened unknowingly: the “story does not derive from a scandal about information, about who knew what when. The massacre at Srebrenica... was a culmination, marking with stark barbarities committed on the people of the UN-



guaranteed ‘safe area’ the end of a long and terribly logical series of tawdry, cowardly decisions by the nations of the West” (Danner 2009, 274). Being able to watch and witness a genocide underway did not provide any assistance in the likelihood of stopping it. The spectacle of suffering had transformed human rights abuse into theater, a “hall of mirrors,” and facilitated disingenuous posturing by saviors and executioners alike (Danner 2009, 221).

## **Conclusion**

### **Witnessing as an Emotional Response to Distant Suffering**

The spectacle of suffering that emerged in the 1990s is a latter day continuation of trends in visual media receptivity, but in a heightened state. Technology made it possible for distant suffering to be a regular feature of nightly news broadcasts and introduced average viewers to extraordinary situations. Images of suffering civilians influenced debate and framed the crisis in a certain way to the audience. For Western audiences, to witness suffering at a distance is to be involved in a central human rights process traditionally reserved for relief workers, medical personnel, and staff on the ground in conflict zones. From a human rights perspective, witnessing is a political act because it disables the abuser from operating in secrecy; accountability for gross violations can only occur when the veil has been lifted: “...a fundamental axiom of the human rights movement in an age of publicity: that the exposure of violence is feared by its perpetrators, and hence that the act of witness is not simply an ethical gesture but an active intervention” (Keenan 2002, 446). To reiterate Amnesty International’s founding motto: “Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.” It is no coincidence that in 1992 the Lawyer’s Committee for Human Rights began its Witness program that literally

distributes video cameras throughout the world to capture human rights abuse for documentary purposes (this program was initiated by rock star/activist/Amnesty supporter Peter Gabriel) (Cohen 2001, 186). The spectacle is equivalent to the lighting of a million candles, but transforming ordinary people into witnesses through television does not simply transform them into human rights activists.

The episodes detailed above evidence the potential for the spectacle to be a force for the expansion of moral community, but only on the basis of emotional appeal.

This issue arises at this time specifically due to the medium of television: Confronting Western spectators with distant suffering is often regarded as the very essence of the power of television. This is the power to make spectators witnesses of human pain by bringing home disturbing images and experiences from faraway places...The tension between a knowing yet incapable witness at a distance is the most profound moral demand that television makes on Western spectators today. (Chouliaraki 2006, 18)

Visually, television has a unique impact on its audience that radio and print never could have. In terms of connecting with that which is covered, the ability to see the faces of the affected cuts deeper than just reading or hearing about their plights and this experience brings the viewer closer to the person on television in a morally relevant way. Witnessing distant suffering is a symptom of globalization in the sense that ordinary audience members can participate in global happenings through the process of watching.

Television provides a bridge across which irrelevant differences seemingly evaporate. Because one party is sitting comfortably at home and one party is struggling to stay alive does not make either party any less apart of the same moral category—and visual media allows one to make this argument to a broader community.

To the extent that this is true, we should observe Western audiences making universalistic claims on behalf of those suffering on television, as we do in throughout

the cases. “This is a solidarity which is forged out of what amounts to empathy; out of the imaginative recognition that despite appearances individuals are actually the same in all morally important respects. I stop thinking about the other as ‘one of them’ and instead start thinking about and treating them as ‘one of us’” (Tester 1995, 472). There is a causal connection, therefore, between witnessing distant suffering on television, having an emotional reaction, and expanding one’s definition of moral inclusion. Communities of care and concern can be expanded through products of globalization, like global media, which impact the demands that citizens make on their governments for human rights policy. It is possible for Western audiences to have solidarity with suffering people in another part of the world and feel a moral compulsion to restore and uphold human dignity.

However, this moral claim—that a Somali, for instance, deserves assistance because she is part of the same human community as I am—originates as an emotional plea. Empathy motivates a series of cascading emotions that may range from sadness and grief to anger, but generally all contribute to a comprehension of what it would be like to be the victim of severe suffering. An understanding of sameness drives the desire to act on behalf of others, and this sameness is communicated forcefully through visual media. However, the emotional response expressed by audiences to distant suffering is a distinct form of witnessing. Journalists, aid workers, and other conventional human rights witnesses remark on the role of feelings in their work, but also are consciously hopeful of the political effect of witnessing. Even for those reporters covering conflict zones who are supposed to remain impartial in their coverage daily confess an acknowledgement of the intervention they are making when reporting a story of suffering (this is central to the

way in which the global public found out about Bosnia). Adapting this into a mass perspective is rare in history, but the 1990s demonstrate the potential for this sensibility to be mainstream, widespread, and normal. There are glimmers of the promise that the spectacle suggests as to the power of the image in supporting collective action. This leads some to be optimistic about the possibility for cultivating a mass human rights movement that stands up against abuse and brutality, in defense of the oppressed and vulnerable. Many advocates of the hopeful view point to the role of emotion in compelling average people to become involved in activism and claim that the “human capacity for compassion is the key to global solidarity” (Linklater 2007, 24).

#### Bearing Witness through the Lens of Spectacle

Yet, there is a qualitative difference between the new form of witnessing underwritten by the spectacle of suffering and those customary in the field of human rights. Witnessing from the vantage of one’s living room and witnessing from within a refugee camp are not equivalent acts and have widely varying consequences. While they may each evoke similar emotions, absent from the former is a concrete comprehension of the reality of suffering. Mediation can transmit images and information, but only a replication of reality. In replicating, the audience receives a version of the event. As Stanley Cohen remarks:

The increased international awareness of atrocities and suffering, the spread of new information technologies, and the globalization of the mass media indeed mean that sovereign states (some of them) are being ‘watched’ as never before. But representing this information is more difficult than ever. There is a profusion of similar images; lines are blurred between fiction and fact (...); ‘reality’ is always in inverted commas... (Cohen 2001, 187)

If this is the case and the audience confronts imagery of human suffering at an alienated distance from the reality of human suffering, then it becomes clear how the emergence of the spectacle affects the audience from the outset. By presenting a mediated version of reality, "...it makes us voyeurs of the suffering of others, tourists amidst their landscapes of anguish" (Ignatieff 1985, 59). It is the illusion of unity that the spectacle creates and when this euphoric feeling of solidarity through television attempts to be translated into political action, it generates a fickle, shallow constellation of actors. An audience cannot transform into a social movement through emotions alone. Emotions do not account for politics and human rights abuse is inherently political. "What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs is the existence of a relevant political consciousness. Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will likely be experienced as, simply, unreal..." (Sontag 1977, 19). Graphic news coverage of atrocity may be a necessary condition for awareness, but it is absolutely insufficient in growing and maintaining a political movement.

Instead of witnesses, in the traditional sense, the spectacle of suffering produces spectators: those audiences that watch without engaging, willfully detached from reality. Television proves it is no panacea. Human rights and humanitarian crises are treated as newsworthy, and even given serious coverage over an extended period of time, but the mediated version beamed into the homes of the viewers maintains moral and geographical distance. There is an acknowledgement of the suffering of others and an emotional response is provoked, but the emotional experience does not translate into political participation. Contrary to the "lessons learned" from the Holocaust, knowing about atrocity does not suffice for stopping it; in the words of a book title on the Bosnian

genocide, “this time we knew” (Cushman and Meštrović 1996). While forces of globalization demonstrate an ability to expand moral capacity across boundaries, facilitating for new communities the recognition of others, that feeling tends to be limited to empathy, devoid of full consciousness.

Absent political consciousness, an emotional mass outpouring is vulnerable to manipulation, evidenced notably in Somalia and Bosnia. While human rights organizations seek to capitalize on sensational reporting of human rights abuse, power elites and media outlets also wrestle for propriety over the message—and these cases suggest that these actors, not human rights NGOs, are more competent and savvy in this area:

The stakes of this mediatic scenario are high; we cannot understand, nor have a properly political relation to, invasions and war crimes, military operation and paramilitary atrocities—both of maximal importance for human rights campaigners—in the present and future if we do not attend to the centrality of image production and management in them. We will be at an even greater loss if we do not admit that the high-speed electronic news media have created news opportunities not just for activism and awareness, but also for performance, presentation, advertising, propaganda, and for political work of all kinds. (Keenan 2004, 442-444)

Foreign policy makers attempt to secure domestic legitimacy for international operations through the deployment of the spectacle. Corporate media conglomerates sought to bolster ratings and advertising revenue also with the use of imagery of suffering. The emotional appeal of a humanitarian narrative serves both sets of interests. And, while it could also serve human rights interests, the spectacle consolidates the gaps between the moral, the emotional, and the political, complicating the prospects for a sustained human rights response. Since witnessing and other forms of human rights interventions are necessarily political acts, the spectacle of suffering does not provide a willing platform

for efforts of this kind. Instead, the spectacle spews content to which no actor has propriety: neither the human rights movement, nor the government. As real time coverage improves over the course of the decade, the spectacle holds both the movement and the government hostage and challenges their veracity to act in the face of genocide.

From the perspective of the human rights movement, in its perpetual quest to bolster its base, the risk inherent in the use of the graphic imagery to attract audience members is providing an unintended substitute for activism: *the spectacle effectively replaces political action with the act of looking*. Viewers feel empathy and compassion for those suffering on television and participate through their voyeurism. “Since the end of the Second World War, indeed, the non-governmental movement has looked forward to the prospect of up-to-date information about crimes in progress, coupled with access to the public opinion that might enable them to be interrupted...the ability to relay acts of witness and evidence around the world in near-real-time, something like this transparent world is increasingly real” (Keenan 2002, 546). However, driven by the imperative that knowledge of atrocity fosters cessation of atrocity, steps in between were taken for granted. The experience of the audience is limited to an emotional response to imagery that curtails further commitment, either personal or political. Television circumscribes the extent of political engagement by the very virtue of its nature and human rights organizations do not demonstrate the aptitude to supplement the coverage with actionable operations.

Furthermore, even as the spectacle diminishes the notion of witness and replaces acting with looking, it has transformed another fulcrum on which the movement has always depended. The “mobilization of shame,” since the founding of Amnesty

International, has been a reliably useful tactic in defending human rights. Yet, most notably in the Bosnian context, the offenders were not only comfortable abusing in plain sight, but they also exhibited skillful mastery of imagery and messaging. To reiterate, a society of spectacle is one in which reality is fictionalized through visuality and contradictions can be suspended in balance—allowing Mladic to sincerely declare to the camera his intentions benign, even when confronted with video feed capturing the aftermath of this savagery. However, if villains can no longer be shamed by the exposure of their crimes, the capacity for bearing shame has been transferred to Western onlookers. Concerned audience members now can use their empathy to shame their own governments into action on behalf of others. This new dynamic fundamentally turns human rights activism on its head, offering possible ways forward, while also sealing off traditional strategies. Amnesty’s model of “shaming and blaming” continues to be successful in their specific approach to individual casework, but shaming of criminals has been rendered impotent in more spectacular instances of violation. When sensational abuse becomes subject of spectacle, human rights advocates have proven unable to overcome the pull of the undertow. Movement actors are drawn into the spectacle without the ability to control it.



## **CHAPTER 4 – BUMPER STICKER ACTIVISM AND THE CORPORATE BRANDING OF THE SAVE DARFUR MOVEMENT**

*“Advertising is about hawking product. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence”*  
– Naomi Klein (1999, 21)

*“...we realized that the closer we could get to a bumper sticker, the better we’d be as an organization” – David Rubenstein, founder of the Save Darfur Coalition (Quoted in Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 344).*

### **Introduction**

The movement to end atrocities in Darfur, Sudan was the culmination of those campaigns and events that preceded it and was fundamentally shaped by the successes and failures of the human rights movement of the late-twentieth century. From its use of celebrities and mass cultural trends to the reliance on visual media, this broad campaign demonstrated a capacity to learn from that which came before it and in its own right profoundly expanded upon the model. Weighing heavily in the minds of the movement’s architects was the breakthrough against South African Apartheid, filtered through the memory of inaction in Rwanda; the synthesis of these events frames the approach of Save Darfur. Yet, as a twenty-first century human rights movement, at its disposal were new technologies and penetrating markets. To avoid pitfalls of the past, and the sense of having to reinvent the wheel at the emergence of a new crisis, the Save Darfur Campaign sought to institutionalize its brand of activism by integrating past models and injecting

them with the force of Madison Avenue advertising strategies. The employment of corporate marketing firms was primarily responsible for the unfortunate public relations missteps and controversies wrought in the process of building the movement. Through its efforts to maximize donor appeal, raise awareness, and leverage its popular support in terms of political influence, Save Darfur was effective as a marketing push, but failed in its mission. The movement suffered from a genuine disconnect between its means and its ends: rather than politicizing its supporters in the service of its cause, advertising became a self-perpetuating end in itself.

Yet, the diffusion of human rights activity around Darfur was in many respects miraculous. In a few short years, Darfur was transformed from “a remote Sudanese province little known even to Africanist scholars,” into the site of great suffering and the object of tremendous outrage and compassion (De Waal 2008, 43). The movement to “save Darfur” captivated the public imagination through a grassroots approach to organizing that generated support from high school classrooms and college campuses to the US Department of State and the International Criminal Court. The Save Darfur Coalition (SDC), the umbrella organization founded in 2004, sits as the center node of this network of divergent actors: a diverse group representing, among others, evangelical Christians, Jews, Armenians, Muslims, and secular humanists. Citizen activism in support of human rights rose to new heights and projected into the future what is possible, while also consolidating progress through the formation of new institutions solely tasked with responding to mass atrocities. However, since the fervor has subsided, observers are beginning to take stock of the movement to save Darfur: exactly what was it, what was done, and how was it done? Was this cause célèbre actually a landmark in

the history of global human rights activism, or a game of smoke and mirrors—a mirage of merchandising masked as political engagement?

The eruption of civil society activity around the issue of Darfur was a mass phenomenon, often compared to the Anti-Apartheid movement in scope and scale (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 338; Lanz 2009, 669). While there are indeed many similarities, the most striking difference relates to the movements' duration: the Anti-Apartheid movement began thirty years before it reached critical mass and nearly forty years before its ends were realized. In Darfur, however, a movement was born, peaked, and receded, all within five years, without having its primary objectives met. Yet, the movement for Darfur made steady headlines, motivated key policymakers, and mobilized a very significant constituency. Saving Darfur became the subject of bake sales, benefit concerts, opinion pieces, and episodes of television drama, and was thrust into public dialogue with a sense of great urgency. Essentially, it had all the characteristics of a successful human rights campaign. However, inconsistencies plagued the movement and remain its conflicted legacy. While it leaves in its wake permanent institutions for the prevention of genocide, the movement also calls into question the authenticity and credibility of human rights activists due to the dubious deployment of casualty figures, aggressive advertising techniques, and force-forward demands. Embarrassing incidents involving the refutation of body count totals used in public advertising, serious doubts as to whether or not a “genocide” was in fact being perpetrated, and calls for the use of force at odds with the wishes of aid agencies on the ground, created a non-governmental organization (NGO) sphere fraught with tension and invalidated certain pillars of the movement. Yet, Save Darfur put the issue of genocide on the front page and in the talking

points of presidential candidates, cabinet members, and sitting heads of state—and this development, however it was accomplished, should not be underappreciated.

But, the controversy persists: what explains the disconnect between rhetoric and reality? As Save Darfur continued to call for an end to the genocide, it became increasingly clear that genocide might not be in progress at all. Therefore, why did the hub organization of this movement muddy itself in half-truths on billboards? In exploring the underside of this acclaimed non-profit, the Save Darfur Coalition is cast as idealistic and forward-thinking, as well as naïve and listless. The critique that follows is conscious of the learning curve experienced by the leaders of SDC and the monumental task they set for themselves—to affect the domestic policy of a sovereign state, largely through the mobilization of average citizens of another country. However, an honest critique must take seriously the unintended consequences of even genuine intentions and, if NGOs are going to inject themselves into geopolitics in such a significant way, they must be held to account. This chapter is an attempt to contextualize the actions of Save Darfur, investigate its causes and effects, and inquire as to the forces that shaped the movement.

Testimonials and statements from key movement players, such as John Prendergast, George Clooney, and others, suggest that a driving force in the founding of Save Darfur drew on lessons from Rwanda above other prior events. Paramount among those lessons was the necessity to motivate political will through the mobilization of citizens with a clear and vociferous message: committing genocide is intolerable and there will be political costs for a government's failure to intervene on behalf of innocent civilian lives. Repeatedly referencing Romeo Dallaire's first-hand account (2004) and Samantha Power's (2007) journalistic retelling of the 1994 genocide, the architects of

Save Darfur sought to generate sufficient public outcry that would go beyond mere awareness raising, because the other events of the 1990s, mainly Somalia and Bosnia, were instructive on this point: being aware of, and even visually witnessing, atrocities was inadequate for fomenting a popular movement, let alone formulating useful public policy. Instead, Darfur would propel human rights beyond this initial insight. To speak out forcefully and collectively on abuse, as an expression of cosmopolitan solidarity with those suffering, transcends the imperative to bear witness, which proves itself to be a necessary but insufficient component. However, as we will see, the methods used to initiate a solidarity movement and exert pressure on public officials matter. That masses can shout in full volume and with resolute confidence on an issue says nothing of substance. As loud as a cry may be, attention must be paid to questions of what is being said, to whom, by whom, and how.

Indeed, this chapter pivots on the suggestion that the Save Darfur initiated a more thorough blend of *outreach as advertising* than any other human rights campaign, but somewhat to its detriment. The structure of the organization, as it was founded, relied heavily on outside, independent contractors to complete many of its central functions, such as fundraising, communication, coordination, advocacy, governmental relations, and strategy. Adhering to a “grassroots” approach for Save Darfur took form as an incoherent hybrid: students and civilians writing letters and attending rallies, notified by emails messaged by corporate advertising agencies. The movement to end atrocities in Darfur at once emerged as a popular surge of energy, while also being coaxed by very carefully selected slogans and images. A seeming contradiction, Save Darfur advanced a model of activism that relied as much on traditional grassroots methods, as on manufactured tactics

teased from above. While progressive organizations frequently turn to an emergent cottage industry of campaign coordinators and strategy managers, the degree to which the Save Darfur movement was conducted by those same firms responsible for corporate advertising is reflected in the message produced and the goals accomplished: the anti-genocide platform was transformed into a brand, an identity that its supporters embraced, but whose substance ceased to reflect facts on the ground.

The backdrop for this development is an ascendant corporate that is more consolidated, more complete, and more penetrating than ever. In an environment of diminished competition marked by fewer and more profitable companies, monopoly capitalism appears in a more palpable form. Corporations were changing not only in shape, but in expression as well. As companies found themselves at or near the top of their sector, the quest for preponderance compelled a more aggressive approach to advertising and marketing. It became essential for companies to sell themselves as more than simply the producer of goods, but instead as an essential component of a quality lifestyle. From whom one purchases commodity goods and services becomes the mark of value and status. This most recent turn in “branding” is the consequence of corporate consolidation and demonstrates the deepening of corporate influence on social life. The dramatic extent of this transformation is evident simply by a quick glance at the landscape that surrounds us: the logos on the sides of buses and on the clothing we wear, and the slogans that have become ubiquitous parts of our post-modern vernacular. However, these are not mere images or phrases—they are competitive attempts to objectify consumers as means for maximizing profit by nurturing walking, talking commercials.

Much can, and will, be said of the rise to prominence of corporate advertising at the turn of the twenty-first century. This chapter revolves around the juxtaposition of the initiation of a grandiose human rights campaign in the context of corporate branding, and the thread weaving together these distinct areas is the use of branding strategies in the movement to save Darfur. The attempt by movement architects to pre-package the conflict in Darfur in quick, lucid sound bites was effective in motivating average people to care about a crisis a world away but it did not correspond to the facts on the ground. I suggest that truth and reality were two early casualties in the campaign, sacrificed (inadvertently, yet not without pretext) for the sake of boiling down the cause in order to fit it on a bumper sticker, a t-shirt, and a website banner. The label of genocide, the inflated body counts, and the oversimplification of history and context ultimately complicated and denigrated the movement's ability to accomplish its goals and I contend this is due to the role played by those actors seeking to brand human rights engagement as a product to be consumed.

In order to demonstrate this cross-pollination, the chapter begins by detailing the cultural and social impacts of branded advertising and the prevalence of this marketing strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, correlations will be drawn between corporate culture and the campaign design that emerged from Save Darfur. To the extent the movement's outreach strategy was transformed into a branding agenda, the corporate influence becomes clear. The critique rests on the hypothesis that these tactics are misappropriated and ultimately harmed the movement's chances of being successful. Yet, the Save Darfur Coalition was founded with the utmost of intentions by talented, experienced people. It generated impressive grassroots support for a dire conflict in

which hundreds of thousands of civilians died and millions were driven to flight.

However, aside from some notable policy accomplishments, SDC continued to battle against genocide after the violence was over, and dismayed elites and other supporters with disingenuous outreach techniques. Squaring these complicated circumstances will require dissecting the organization's origins and strategies, and critiquing SDC's balance sheets and other expressions of its priorities. This chapter will conclude with some takeaway lessons from the movement to "save Darfur," in light of its successes and shortcomings.

### **The Socio-Political Economy of Advertising**

Advertising is a pervasive feature of contemporary society. Slogans are the new *lingua franca*, and logos the smirk smattered across the landscape. There are fewer surreal experiences than stepping off a bus in a rural town in a foreign country to be greeted by words and images that signify soft drinks, cigarettes, or ice cream familiar from home; at once comforting, as well as unsettling. Colors and symbols carry equivalent meaning for diverse communities of people. Yet, these messages are not on their faces ideological, or partisan, or pointed; it is not a political perspective, a call to arms, or a rallying cry. Advertising communicates a sales pitch for a product to be purchased by consumers in the market. Billboards and commercial air space serve as venues for marketing campaigns that seek to reach a maximum volume of potential customers and clients. Through advances in communications technology, the deepening penetration of advertising reaches a growing swath of the public and expands the consumer commodity market. Corporate marketing is a driver and a symptom of



globalization and, in its accelerated form, marks a distinct turn in post-industrial capitalism.

A central tension of the contemporary marketplace is the consumer's experience of being inundated by advertising—a seemingly endless barrage of logos and catch phrases—yet as the volume becomes more overwhelming, the commodities themselves represent fewer and fewer corporations. The oligopolistic structure of the market bears down on the consumer in the form of ad campaigns on multimedia platforms: from billboard to commercial radio, and from product placement to pop-up window. Still, it is insufficient for marketing to expand into multiple venues; for to wrangle a competitive advantage, corporations strive for a deepening of the association with its commodities among consumers. In order to accomplish this lofty objective, traditional forms of advertising have been eclipsed by a far more totalizing strategy known as branding.

Historically, however, companies sold products. A consequence of the industrial revolution, in the late-nineteenth century products and companies were mutually associative because there was commonly one dominant company that produced any given commodity: “Oil was Standard Oil, steel was Carnegie, film was Kodak, soup was Campbell’s” (Barber 2007, 175). As the market opened up, companies were compelled to distinguish themselves from their competitors, as well as protect themselves legally from infringement. The concept of the trademark was developed to serve these purposes, and laws and practices rose in parallel to the emergence of the modern corporation: “between 1850 and 1890 the number of patents granted each year in the major Western nations increased by a factor of ten” (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004, 16). Predictable market interactions and competition among fledgling firms spawned the move toward

trademarking products and is very much a legacy of the period. “Brands were born as stepchildren of the entrepreneurial competition that followed the age of cartels and trusts” (Barber 2007, 178). When the largest corporations are broken down by anti-monopoly regulation, the market spreads out and becomes fairer and more competitive. This was true even in the market for basic commodity goods: “Not surprisingly, Proctor & Gamble with its monopoly on household products being challenged by new competitors was the first to codify a ‘brand management system’ back in 1931” (Barber 2007, 178).

In this context, companies were forced to advertise more deliberately to emphasize the relative quality difference between competitors. It was no longer enough to provide information on the product; advertising would now have to attract consumers in a more clever and “manipulative” fashion (Barber 2007, 176). However, as firms were adapting to increase competitiveness and respond to checks from regulators, consumers were changing as well. What was called “consumptionism” in 1925 by observer Samuel Strauss described a new trend among the American public to, in Strauss’ words, pursue “luxury and security” above other traditionally fulfilling values (Leach 1993, 268). Retail and industrial sectors, responding to the shock of World War I, restructured their operations, and organized labor suffered setback after setback in the face of economic crisis (Leach 1993, 265). Contemporaneously, scholars of the Frankfurt School began their similar, but more rigorous, critique of consumerism and affluence to be fully realized in the post-WWII era. The advances made in the world of marketing and the rising taste for non-essential commodity goods among broader sections of the population is, of course, not a sheer coincidence. Instead, it is fair to identify a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two realms that has the effect of

intensifying the association consumers have with brands and fortifying corporations with social purpose.

During the wave of mergers and acquisitions of the 1980s and '90s, the brand took on a status above that of the company, and that of the product. The 1988 purchase of Kraft by Philip Morris for \$12.6 billion signaled a “defining moment” in the history of corporate branding because the food company was acquired for six times its actual worth on paper, assigning a value to the brand itself (Klein 1999, 8). For brand managers this development justified a further boom in spending, recognizing the potential profit windfall from effective branding and turning ad money into “an investment in cold hard equity” (Klein 1999, 8). However, five years later, in the midst of recession, branding faced a setback when Marlboro cigarettes lowered its prices by 20 percent to compete with bargain products. Of all companies to take this measure, Marlboro is an acclaimed franchise for its memorable “Marlboro Man” mascot and this move shocked investors (Klein 1999, 12). In the wake of this event and the stagnant economic trends of the early 1990s, “two tiers of consumerism” fell into place: one tier responded to competition from below and the “big box” retailers, WalMart for example, were born to inexpensively supply basic goods to consumers. The high end of retail, however, such as Mercedes-Benz, transcended the early branding of Marlboro by messaging corporate commodities as components of one’s identity (Klein 1999, 16). If brands could rise above the ebbs and flows of markets and situate themselves as indispensable ingredients to the modern lifestyle, corporations could proceed to “monopolize ever-expanding stretches of cultural space” with willful acquiescence from the consumer (Klein 1999, 16).

After all, maybe sophisticated brands of this nature are exactly what consumers want. In an environment saturated with advertising, brand recognition provides certainty: “...the brand becomes a symbol of confidence for the consumer, and a commitment to quality and compliance with certain rules for the producer...[a] contractual dimension of the brand” (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004, 10). Branding insists on thorough, high quality uniformity through all the producer’s commodities, which in turn attracts and demands loyalty from the consumer base. By amassing “capital of confidence,” through a history of reliability coupled with coherent messaging, corporations project themselves as self-identifiable (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004, 10); that is, a brand that consumers want to be a part of and take part in. Confidence is bred culturally—by developing a reputation and an association often tied to status: Gucci and Louis Vuitton exude luxury, Disney is fun and family-oriented, Nike stands for athletic prowess, and Chanel embodies glamour and grace. However, lack of confidence is also bred culturally. From the Ford Pinto to the Exxon Valdez and BP oil spill, negatively branded products and events are emblazoned with corporate names and remind consumers of harm to personal safety or ecological recklessness, for instance. When disparaging associations become attached to a brand, it is re-branded—re-cast as that which it wants to be, rather than that which it is. Image is the paramount goal of branding, not truth.

The name, the logo, and the slogan are each essential components of contemporary brands. “At the beginning of the history of industrial brands, this was often the name of a person, intended to lend a familiar, folksy quality to a standardized product, but also to emphasize the existence of human know-how upstream of the chain of production” (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004, 13). In the twenty-first century, brand

names are short words with one or two syllables that place the corporation in the future having forgotten its human origins or merged past. A logo is the graphic representation of the corporation designed to communicate meaning and transmit familiarity. With crisp contours and vivid color schemes, the logo is often more recognizable than the brand name, as it is likely to be plastered on sponsored items without the name present at all. For its prominence, the logo is “the heraldic shield of modern times,” or the family crest of the firm (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2004, 32). Finally, a slogan is the fullest articulation of the brand, synthesizing the message behind the name and logo. The projected identity is formalized with a mantra: “just do it”; “the real thing”; “think different”; “do it your way”; “reach out and touch someone”; “you’ve come a long way, baby!” Exemplifying assertiveness, authenticity, nonconformity, individuality, connectedness, and empowerment, each of these slogans are (ostensibly) attractive qualities that consumers desire to possess. The insinuation, when fastened to a commodity, is that the consumer will experience these euphoric sensations upon purchasing said goods, be they soft drinks, fast food, or cigarettes. Commodities become not what we own, but who we are. In place of ethics or values or other subcutaneous components that make us who we are, consumers are constituted by their possessions. This chapter addresses an instance in which political principles themselves become branded and commodified.

But, at the same time, this implication is neither directly stated nor actually intended. Even ad executives know that simple commodity items do not ensure happiness, high self-esteem, or true emancipation. A broader, savvier picture is being painted. Such items, and more so in higher tier goods such as clothing, automobiles, and

jewelry, are the key elements to a robust, actualized lifestyle: “brands are gradually dissociated from the specific content of the products and services they label and reaffiliated with styles, sentiments, and emotions at best remotely linked to those products and services” (Barber 2007, 174). Consumer capitalism evolved to package its products as components of an ethereal commodity existence. “The old paradigm had it that all marketing was selling a product. In the new model, however, the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual” (Klein 1999, 21). In order to sell a product as if it were a lifestyle or an experience, the branding must be complete. The interplay of the logo and slogan and the deployment of an advertising campaign are the tangible components to a fundamentally cultural appeal. As Starbucks founder Howard Schultz readily admits, “the real goal is ‘to establish emotional ties’” (Quoted in Barber 2007, 179). To forge connections between the psychological and the material is to craft an image of the product that rises above its instrumental value or even its status attribution. Branding “increasingly seeks to take these associations out of the representational realm and make them a lived reality” (Klein 1999, 29). After the product has been replaced by a projection of the branded lifestyle that the product brings into existence, the final sleight, then, is to have consumers transform into advertisements themselves. This is the force of branding: when this spectacular illusion has been created, the participants perpetuate its momentum by trafficking in the logos and slogans through the clothing they wear, the places they shop, the cars they drive, and the devices they use—walking, talking viral marketing.

The question remains, however, how this translates to the political arena. If branding is an effective means of communication, then the tactic might carry over into other realms that have a need for the transmission of messages. One could reasonably anticipate the desire to embed meaning and identity within a political movement, so as to conjure commitment and solidarity among its supporters. With this affiliation, a movement could assert itself and continue to broaden its constituency. However, there is a significant element of façade, of untruth, and of duplicity in advertising that one might not welcome in a political movement's outreach campaign. Coke is not actually "the real thing" by any measure of reality; AT&T provides the ability to only figuratively "reach out and touch someone"; and by co-opting feminism, Virginia Slims is actually demonstrating how far women have *not* come, baby. While a degree of tongue-and-cheek word play can be tolerated in the advertising world, it is an approach with a tenuous relationship with politics. Certainly in election campaigns candidates present themselves as that which they wish they were, or that as which they wish to be seen, branding themselves as a reformer, a maverick, or a stalwart defender of the way things were. Yet, in social movements or broad popular campaigns, a correlation between the demands of the participants and the truth is paramount to the achievement of legitimacy. When this imperative is sacrificed or lost unintentionally, the claim to moral authority may vanish in the process. The movement to save Darfur provides a fresh case with which to evaluate the use of corporate branding in a human rights campaign.

## **Branding an Anti-Genocide Campaign**

### **The Movement to End Atrocities in Darfur, Sudan**

Ten years after the Rwandan genocide galvanized the global public with horrific tales of raw, violence, another African conflict would bring those memories flooding back and awaken “...arguably the largest international social movement since anti-apartheid...” (Lanz 2009, 669). Initiated in the United States, the movement to end atrocities in Darfur, Sudan reached from elementary school classrooms to Hollywood to the halls of Congress. While the movement emerged spontaneously, its growth was orchestrated by a cadre of foreign policy veterans and well connected members of the non-profit world through a series of new organizations formed to respond to the crisis: the Save Darfur Coalition (SDC), the Genocide Intervention Network, and STAND (Students Taking Action Now: Darfur!). Of the many consequences of this grassroots surge, debates on a range of current issues in global affairs were shaped, from humanitarian intervention and Responsibility to Protect, to the war on terror and the prosecution of war criminals. The Save Darfur Movement (SDM)<sup>4</sup> personifies a twenty-first century human rights movement by virtue of the way it was assembled from the lessons learned of previous moments, but is not without its controversy. Despite the amazing outpouring of energy, this chapter calls into question both the ends and the means of SDM, and raises skepticism about future manifestations of this model.

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter will employ the acronym “SDC” to refer to the specific organization named the Save Darfur Coalition and the acronym “SDM” refers to the larger movement to end atrocities in Darfur, which implies the centrality of SDC in this effort as a hub and a driver of grassroots activism.



As early as February 2003, Amnesty International issued a press release warning of a deteriorating situation in the western region of Darfur and describing attacks on civilians by “armed horsemen” and retaliation against government target, apparently by “bandits” (Amnesty International 2003a). The report described ugly scenes of abduction and random violence against villagers, bodies shot and discarded into fires set by looters who had razed crops and homes (Amnesty International 2003a). While the press release expressed concern about an escalating cycle of violence, as well as grievances by those local bandit groups, it did not demonstrate awareness of the organization of rebels in the area as well as the origins of these horsemen. A month later, UN Human Rights Coordinator for Sudan, Mukesh Kapila was quoted as saying that Darfur was the site of “the world’s greatest humanitarian crisis” and “the only difference between Rwanda and Darfur is now the numbers involved” (Prunier 2007, 127). Despite this ending Kapila’s tenure in Sudan, having been transferred by the UN out of country, the comparison to Rwanda—and therefore to genocide—now circulated among observers freely (Crilly 2010, 168). By April, Amnesty called for Darfur to be folded into the monitoring directives of the peace process governing the North-South Sudanese civil war that had raged since the 1980s, despite being unrelated to the civil war (Amnesty International 2003b). In June, the International Crisis Group (ICG) issued its first report on this splinter conflict and similarly recommended the inclusion of Darfur into to the peacekeeping infrastructure already in place (International Crisis Group 2003). The alarms were sounding of rising rates of violence and human rights abuse against innocents, but, besides Kapila, there were no broader arguments made about the violence. It was not

until vocal journalists and commentators became involved that accusations were levied as to the intentional, systematic, and coordinated nature of the attacks.

NGO reporting continued to follow the events unfolding in Darfur throughout 2003. However, much of this news flew under the radar as the public became consumed with the US-UK invasion of Iraq. Eric Reeves, an American English professor and follower of Sudanese affairs who became a vocal defender of Darfuri rights online and in public debates, first blogged about Darfur on October 8, 2003. The government had begun an aerial assault on the region, in violation of a cease-fire agreement, sending 75,000 refugees fleeing over the border into Chad (Reeves 2003). As these attacks continued, often combining ground forces supported by aerial bombardment, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs issued updates through its IRIN news agency of refugee figures and details of the campaign against villages. It would not be until March 24 of the following year that the conflict reached the desk of Nicholas D. Kristof, columnist at the *New York Times* (Kristof 2004).

Kristof was preoccupied for much of 2003 urging against the invasion of Iraq and criticizing the Bush Administration's march to war and post-invasion programming, among other pet issues such as human trafficking, Third World disease, and women's rights. In the initial column, the term "ethnic cleansing" was invoked to describe the violence, due to Kristof's framing of the attacks as against "black Africans" and by "lighter-skinned Arab raiders, the Janjaweed" (Kristof 2004). Over the years of the conflict there were accounts of racial epithets used by the Janjaweed as they maraud through villages; and there are real distinctions to be made between the Islamic elements in northern Sudan that differ from the tribal ethnicities of the people in Darfur that largely

affiliate as Masseleit, Fur, and Zaghawa (inter alia Reeves 2003). This description of the conflict was seized upon by observers and activists, including the Save Darfur Coalition, and became a conceptual framework for explaining the context for violence in movement literature and talking points. However, the racial dimension also eschewed another, seemingly more accurate description of the conflict as one between the government and a rebel faction, in which the government used overwhelmingly brutal tactics against the rebels' civilian base of support. For critics, the racial argument was evidence of deeper ties between the activist organizations and the US government to the extent that the vilifying of Arab violence could be included in the grander narrative of the Bush Administration's war on terror (Mamdani 2007).<sup>5</sup>

But, Sudan was not a new issue produced for the benefit of geopolitics. Since the civil war raged, a civil society constituency had been engaged in the East African state, largely to defend the Christian populations in the South from the Muslim regime in the North. Christian Solidarity International (CSI) is one such group: a self-described human rights organization devoted to the defense of those facing religious persecution, at-risk children, and humanitarian relief (Christian Solidarity International 2011). CSI has been at the forefront of combating modern slavery in Africa by using the controversial method of buying back slaves from slave-traders. In June 2004, CSI helped form the Sudan Campaign, along with members of the US Congressional Black Caucus, who "held daily protests in front of the Sudanese embassy [in Washington, DC], allowing themselves to be arrested for obstructing the embassy entrance as an act of civil disobedience"

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<sup>5</sup> Controversial and racy, this debate is the subject of other critiques of the Save Darfur Movement, but will not be featured, except for this mention, in this chapter.

(Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 341). The movement to Save Darfur is marked by the collaboration of strange bedfellows; beginning with Evangelical Christians and American black politicians, soon joined by an influential Jewish group associated with genocide prevention efforts.

The Committee of Conscience at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) was established in 1995, two years after the opening of the Museum itself, and in 2000 issued its first genocide warning for Southern Sudan. Ethnic groups in the south, such as the Dinka and Nuer, were claimed to be under threat from Khartoum, whose actions “are primarily responsible for the deaths of around two million people” and “another four to five million people have been driven from their homes” (Committee of Conscience 2000). On April 7, 2004, the Committee “strongly reiterated” its previous warning, though this time the ethnic groups were different and potential deaths as a consequence of displacement was named as the cause for alarm—highly unconventional evidence of the commission of genocide (Committee of Conscience 2004). Over the subsequent months, the Committee stepped up its calls for attention, received exposure in mainstream media, and pressured elected officials to take stances, as well. By early summer, an umbrella group formed in New York to address the massive violence in Darfur.

An Emergency Summit was convened on July 14, 2004 at the City University of New York at the direction of Jerry Fowler, Staff Director of the Committee of Conscience at the USHMM, and Ruth Messinger of the American Jewish World Service. Representatives from CSI were invited, as were civil rights groups, Muslim charities, human rights organizations, and other relevant civil society actors (Crilly 2010, 170). Elie

Wiesel, renowned Holocaust survivor, Nobel laureate, and anti-genocide activist, provided keynote remarks and John Prendergast, “who would soon become one of the most ubiquitous Darfur experts” was also on the program (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 344). Prendergast served on the National Security Council under President Bill Clinton, has held a range of prominent positions at organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group, and is a generally well-respected expert on human rights in Africa with significant time spent on the ground. The proceedings produced a Unity Statement declaring violence being perpetrated against civilians in Darfur to be unconscionable and called upon world leaders and international organizations to act. This statement served as the cornerstone of the coalition and larger movement and is an appeal for protest: “We stand together and unite our voices to raise public awareness and mobilize a massive response to the atrocities in Sudan's western region of Darfur” (Save Darfur Coalition 2004). Nearly a week later, the US Congress unanimously passed a resolution declaring the situation in Darfur to be genocide. That same day, July 22, 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell met with Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Sudan, both recognized the gravity of what was happening and what could happen, but neither were willing to use the genocide moniker (Corey 2004). Public pressure rose steadily and resolutely over the subsequent period due entirely to the activism of those associated with the Save Darfur Coalition.

Over 180 diverse organizations that may vehemently disagree on a range of other issues signed on to be apart of SDC and champion the cause, and principal within this broad coalition is the student contingent. On September 14, 2004, ninety Georgetown undergraduate students attended a panel discussion on the crisis in Darfur at USHMM

organized by an intern, Lisa Rogoff, from which would emerge STAND – Students Take Action Now: Darfur. STAND’s founders, Ben Bixby, Martha Heinemann and Nate Wright, set out to end the conflict over the course of fall semester (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 345). STAND became the fulcrum of a movement on college campuses around the issue of Darfur that emerged spontaneously but found centralization useful. National days of action could be issued throughout the network that reached from universities to elementary and high schools. Specifically, divestment efforts began on college campuses by STAND chapters first targeted their own universities’ funds for re-appropriation.

A month later, three students at Swarthmore College, Sam Bell, Mark Hanis and Andrew Sniderman, founded the Genocide Intervention Fund (a name that would be changed to Genocide Intervention Network, or GI-Net) with the hopes of raising enough money to fund peacekeeping operations in Sudan to protect civilians (Zengerle 2006). To accomplish this bold objective, GI-Net initiated a web-based fundraising drive and as the money began pouring in, the fledgling organization needed to find a recipient for an initial sum of \$250,000. In due time, they had run through a range of possible options including giving directly to the African Union (AU) or funneling the cash into Rwanda as proxy and then to the AU. These entrepreneurs then began to contact private security firms, with the hope that GI-Net could take out a contract to send private soldiers into Sudan. After dozens of positive responses, even one unnamed company that agreed to intervene even without consent from the Sudanese government, GI-Net conceded that “going with mercenaries was a bad idea” (Zengerle 2006). Eventually the money was given to an African NGO partnered with the European Union to “train a contingent of female escorts to protect Darfurian women when they leave their refugee camps to search

for firewood” (Zengerle 2006). Genocide Intervention Network has raised over \$1.6 million and has become a formative part of the Save Darfur Movement, transitioning from dorm room scheme to Beltway mainstay (Preston 2006).

Despite the initial burst of naïveté—STAND’s notion that they could end the crisis in three months time, or GI-Net’s attempt to hire private military contractors—the student contribution to the Save Darfur Movement was crucial; perhaps it was the idealism of the students that undergirded the momentum of the movement. The ascent of Darfur as an issue occurred rapidly and continued over the course of the year. “There was a growing appetite to hear about Darfur. It seemed as if genocide was the cause of 2004” (Crilly 2010, 169). Civil society activity motivated institutional and official personnel to stake out positions. In September, US Secretary of State Colin Powell finally described the crisis in Darfur as “genocide” in his testimony to the Senate, seen as a concession to the movement (Flint and De Waal 2008, 182). Two weeks later, the UN Security Council dispatched a panel to determine the scale and scope of violence in Darfur, and ultimately to identify whether or not what was going on could be called “genocide.” Calls from the public for intervention (of some variety) were vociferous and an official determination was essential. While “moral indignation and its attendant media coverage” maintained Darfur as “*the* humanitarian crisis and horror story of the year,” in order to sustain the campaign, the movement understood that it must transcend the media cycle (Prunier 2007, 125).

Mainstream media culture both helped and hurt this possibility. Also in September, the film *Hotel Rwanda* was released to wide acclaim and direct ties were made between Rwanda and Darfur among the audience. Don Cheadle, who portrayed the

hero Paul Rusesabagina, was drawn into the movement and proved to be an instrumental figure. In reality, Rwanda and Darfur did not share many similarities, except that they are both violent conflicts in East Africa. However, the reminder of the 1994 genocide perpetuated the 2004 movement and generated “the biggest boost to American popular interest” (Flint and De Waal 2008, 184). Even in light of this popularity, the audience has a short attention span and the December 26 Asian Tsunami quickly eclipsed Darfur as the cause of the moment. Donations streamed in and news coverage swept up the audience. The tsunami was treated as wholly apolitical and rested on the emotional affect of the devastation (Prunier 2007, 128). Coverage of the tsunami dealt a minor media setback to SDM, but one it would overcome. Contemporaneously, the UN contemplated its stance on the violence in Darfur, complicating matters for the movement.

In January 2005, the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, created by the Security Council three months prior, returned with its findings and determined that crimes against humanity, but not genocide, were being committed (Mamdani 2009a, 42-43). Both government actors and rebel groups were culpable in war crimes, but neither could be identified as *genocidaires*, due to the lack of intention to destroy a singular group in whole or in part, as the Convention mandates. The Commission saw the conflict as between a regime and a rebel faction, and while attacks against civilians were illegal and reprehensible, the central systematic force of genocide was conspicuously absent (Flint and De Waal 2008, 183). While a ruling such as this one might setback a movement like SDM, in fact it did not. Movement literature and talking points continued to use the language of genocide as they had from the beginning. Moving forward, there was an awkward disconnect between the position of the movement and others’



conceptions of the nature of the conflict. Despite facts on the ground, the movement was not deterred in its mission to grow its constituency and raise the profile of the cause. In the ensuing years, the movement went into overdrive, deploying a wide range of popular culture mechanisms to further entrench the issue of Darfur in the public consciousness.

The Save Darfur Movement produced a merchandising boom: music, television, video games, clothing, and accessories. “No opportunity for raising funds or attention had been ignored” (Crilly 2010, 165). Lisa Rogoff, an initiator of STAND while working at USHMM, suggested a green, rubber wristband for Darfur, after Lance Armstrong’s Livestrong cancer support foundation whose yellow band “had acquired that intangible quality of ‘cool’ due to the parade of Hollywood stars seen wearing them” (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 347). Amnesty International (AI) issued a compilation album called “Instant Karma,” on which pop stars recorded cover songs written by John Lennon, proceeds from which went to AI’s Campaign to Save Darfur. The television medical drama “ER” filmed an episode in South Africa where they staged the scene of a Darfuri refugee camp. “T-shirts, mugs and even underpants emblazoned with messages such as ‘Think, Act, Save Darfur’ or ‘Empower Darfur’ could be bought for a few dollars on the internet. The discerning pet could eat dinner from a bowl proclaiming, ‘If we don’t speak up we become accomplices’” (Crilly 2010, 165). Students at the University of Southern California even devised a video game. Called “Darfur is Dying,” the game allows the player to occupy the role of refugee seeking water and evading Janjaweed pursuit (Vargas 2006). Timberland, the footwear and apparel company, partnered with actor and activist Don Cheadle to design a work boot with a message in its tread, “Stomp Out Genocide,” and an accompanying t-shirt. Only one hundred pairs of the boots were

manufactured and “delivered to humanitarian activists, policy makers, journalists, and entertainment professionals who raised awareness of and championed change in Darfur” (Cheadle and Prendergast 2007, 148-149). Profits from these ventures benefited the budgets of activist organizations and provided much needed revenue for operating expenses.

Cheadle, who was among the most visible celebrities on Darfur, teamed up with John Prendergast for multiple trips to the region, interviews, op-eds, and two books, but he was not alone. Cheadle and Prendergast founded the Not On Our Watch foundation, along with a letterhead that veritably mirrored the closing credits of the heist films *Oceans Eleven*, *Twelve*, and *Thirteen*—George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, and Jerry Weintraub. Around the same time, in 2006, Pitt and Angelina Jolie publically announced a \$1 million private gift to several Sudanese NGOs (Mamdani 2009a, 53). Clooney raised the profile of Save Darfur as he raised his profile within the movement. Taking repeated trips to Sudan and twice contracting malaria, the actor once brought along the film crew for Oprah Winfrey’s show to visit (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 360). More so than others, Clooney also testified in front of US Congress and for UN committees on Darfur offering impassioned pleas for intervention and civilian protection.

Besides the prominent *Oceans* crowd, Mia Farrow stood out as one who “has dirtied herself in the dust of Darfur” (Crilly 2010, 172). As the 2008 Beijing Olympics approached, Farrow ramped up public attention on the relationship between China and the regime in Khartoum, terming the global event as the Genocide Olympics. Based on China’s increasing demand for oil, the nation was investing heavily both in Sudan itself and in its relations with Sudan. Farrow went on hunger strikes and famously dissuaded

film icon Steven Spielberg from directing the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, despite his contract to do so. Leveraging the China issue allowed for spin-offs to materialize, including US speed skater Joey Cheek's Team Darfur—a coalition of athletes dedicated to the cause of Darfur. Farrow provided the divestment wing of the movement with the greatest exposure and contributed to its many successes including against Fidelity Investments, “one of the largest mutual fund companies in the United States, has sold more than ninety percent of its holdings in PetroChina, an oil sector company with close ties to the Sudanese government” (Thomas-Jensen and Spiegel 2008, 212). Oddly, however, Farrow also “approached the private security company Blackwater [now Xe Services] to see if they were ready to go to Darfur” at a lunch with CEO Erik Prince (De Waal 2008, 44).

This outpouring of energy and wide-ranging efforts culminated in various popular expressions. On April 30, 2006, the Save Darfur Coalition held its biggest national event to date, with a rally in Washington, DC on the National Mall. Headlining the event were figures such as George Clooney, Elie Wiesel, Samantha Power, Paul Rusesabagina, Joey Cheek, and then-Senator Barack Obama. With the White House as backdrop, this event decidedly focused on the American response to the atrocities, and the capacity of the public to motivate an official response of some sort. The event represented the culmination of two years of progress on the issue, marked largely by the attendance and the media attention it garnered. In the crowd were cross-sections of the population from Jewish and Armenian groups bused in from throughout the country, to repatriated African refugees. There was some criticism about the lack of diversity of speakers (Eichler-Levine and Hicks 2007), but the audience personified the broad base of support that SDM

had cultivated (in the United States). Leading up to the rally, which also consisted of a west coast satellite event in San Francisco, SDC “Save Darfur launched a ‘Million Voices for Darfur’ campaign, aiming to get one million Americans to send postcards to President Bush...With a parallel postcard campaign running online, the number of Americans signed up to receive email updates from Save Darfur increased from 50,000 in January 2006 to over 400,000 by April” (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 357). While receipt of emails signals some nominal semblance of commitment, at the very least this figure indicates that people were aware of the issue. In the fall, another rally was held in Central Park, New York City, as well as at sites throughout the world—a sign that SDM was beginning to be aware of its limitations as an American movement and the imperative of internationalization (Save Darfur Coalition 2011).

Simultaneously, George Clooney gave testimony to the UN Security Council to supplement the AU force in Darfur which was set to expire at the end of the month: “So after September 30<sup>th</sup>, you won’t need the UN. You will simply need men with shovels and bleached white linen and headstones” (Quoted in Mamdani 2009a, 54). Clooney, in essence had declared the 2007 campaign theme which shifted from attaining critical mass to a sense of impending doom and urgency, the hourglass serving as a de facto mascot. The next year witnessed a wider barrage of mass events. In the spring, a “Global Day for Darfur” was held in forty-seven states and thirty-five countries (Thomas-Jensen and Spiegel 2008, 210-211). “More than 3000 campaigners gathered in London outside Downing Street where a giant hourglass was filled with red liquid to represent the blood spilled so far in the conflict” (Crilly 2010, 163). Film stars Matt Damon and Hugh Grant were photographed for posters in which they aggressively smash similar, blood-filled

hourglasses (BBC 2007). Mia Farrow hosted a rally in Washington, and activists in Boston participated in a “die-in,” in solidarity with those civilians under fire. “All around the world protestors turned hourglasses upside down to demonstrate how time for a solution to be found was running out” (Crilly 2010, 163).

However, despite Clooney’s guilt-laden supplication, in the most meaningful sense, the sand in the glass had already expired. By most accounts 2006-2007 were relatively quiet years for violence in Darfur. Casualty rates had drastically declined and the assault experienced in Darfur during 2003-2004—of the murders, village razing, aerial bombardment, and rape—did not reflect the reality of the moment three years later. While far too many people were still dying, these casualties were largely from byproducts of the war, such as unsanitary water in refugee camps and the spread of disease. Regrettable and preventable, these problems are *not* legal indications of genocide. Furthermore, many of the most heavily trafficked death toll figures did not reflect the truth, as independent auditors would demonstrate. Either inflated, manufactured, or mistaken, the numbers of over 400,000 dead flooded advertisements, billboards, and news coverage of the crisis for years, yet, as will be detailed below, they were desperately inaccurate. What accounts for these dramatic inconsistencies? What effect did they have on the movement’s ability to be a credible source of information? What effect did they have on the movement’s capacity to organize and mobilize? Was there a genocide going on, or a large-scale civil conflict? If the latter is a more acute depiction than the former, why the deployment of the genocide language, and to what effect? What would compel legitimate players to deploy factually incorrect information in the service of human rights?

In what follows, an image of the Save Darfur Movement emerges that makes a sympathetic observer uncomfortable. The argument below suggests that movement architects made a concerted effort to project an image of the anti-genocide movement as influential, relevant, and thoroughly “cool.” This was the sought-after brand of the Save Darfur Movement and was not accidental. In fact, it is a deliberate consequence of the employment of corporate marketing firms and branded advertising strategies that sought to drive the message of the movement into public consciousness. The very fact that “Darfur,” an obscure African region in a remote African country, became something that average people could at least associate with a problem, be it genocide or humanitarian crisis, is a testament to the efficacy of the marketing campaign. However, the desire to boil down a complex political crisis into a slogan or a logo for presentation on a bumper sticker lends itself to exactly the kinds of controversies experienced by the movement, in which its legitimacy suffered even as the cause remained cool.

### Controversies and Complications

The dramatic tension of the Save Darfur Movement revolves around several fundamental questions that should confront an anti-genocide campaign: Is a genocide occurring? How do we know this? What is the scale and nature of the violence? Due to the legal implications in utilizing the language of genocide and the gravity it sustains, this determination is historically not something taken lightly. Infamously, leaders have avoided the language of genocide because of the political challenges it presents. Given the way in which Rwanda looms large over the conflict in Darfur, and the reluctance to use the term “genocide” so as to skirt moral obligations to intervene, an alarm sounded when the “G-word” became readily in play.

Journalists and observers initiated the trend as early as March 2004, when Nick Kristof began making the argument (Straus 2005, 128). As noted above, the USHMM's Committee on Conscience issued a genocide alert in July, the same month the US Congress passed a resolution declaring the conflict in Darfur to be genocide. Save Darfur's Unity Statement describes Janjaweed violence: "They wiped out entire villages, destroyed food and water supplies, stole livestock and systematically murdered, tortured and raped civilians" (Save Darfur Coalition 2004). Categorizing these paramilitary actions under a centralized directive, SDC connects the dots to formulate an argument: "The Sudanese government's genocidal, scorched earth campaign has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives through direct violence, disease and starvation, and continues to destabilize the region" (Save Darfur Coalition 2004). Excluding the claim about regional instability (which is pertinent due to the flow of refugees, but not related to the argument for genocide), there are many answers given in this statement, presumably answers to questions that were proposed and resolved.

In the Fall of 2004, the US government interviewed over one thousand Darfuri refugees in Chad to determine its stance on the issue of genocide. On September 9, President Bush issued a statement and Secretary of State Powell spoke before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, both of whom declared that genocide was underway, under the direction of the regime in Khartoum (Straus 2005, 130). "For the burgeoning Darfur movement, getting the US government to use the 'G-word,' as activists referred to it, was an unimaginable coup" (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 343). After all, these were "the first times such senior US government officials had ever conclusively applied the term to a current crisis and invoked the convention [on the Prevention and Punishment of the

Crime of Genocide]” (Straus 2005, 123). If this move was an attempt to appease activists, “the strategy had the opposite effect... The legitimacy the term gave to Darfur advocacy emboldened a fresh and growing pool of activists, convinced that the ‘worst crimes imaginable’ demanded an uncompromising response” (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 343).

From an activist’s perspective, this, of course, would be followed by official action, of some form and perhaps coercive in nature. However, in retrospect, we can see now that despite having energized civil society, the Bush Administration was co-opting the movement and the language of human rights without any intention of intervening in any meaningful way. Yet, other public officials, either more skeptical or less savvy than Bush, were reluctant to describe the conflict as genocide. Western authorities “avoided the term, as did UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who was pilloried in the media for limiting his description of Darfur to ‘massive violations of human rights’” (Straus 2005, 130). Even Samantha Power, the muse of the student movement, preferred the term “ethnic cleansing” for its generality and the uncertainty that the whole group was the target of the violence, rather than the space itself (Straus 2005, 130). Language and the obligations attendant to the use of certain language played a significant role in the debates about Darfur in 2004, as the movement was taking shape. Yet, on a different plane, non-discursive debates were also underway about the empirical facts on the ground: How many people were dead and how did they die? Because this was a case in progress, it was impossible to send human rights monitors to count bodies on a battlefield, or to uncover mass graves in the aftermath of conflict. Therefore, a range of methods was used by a range of people to statistically determine what was going on and at what pace. As politicized as Darfur was becoming, the casualty count would stoke the flames of



controversy and add a dimension of doubt to an already unsettled situation.

Since late 2004, figures as high as 500,000 and as low as 35,000 have been trafficked through official reports and media outlets as accurate portrayals of the level of suffering in Darfur. Casualty counts, however, must be disaggregated in a complex humanitarian emergency such as this. Some proportion of the dead will have died directly from violent attacks and others are accounted for as “excess deaths,” those that die from indirect consequences of war: the danger inherent in refugee flight, malnutrition and starvation, unsanitary conditions, disease, and lack of access to medical care, for instance. While these are by no means inconsequential effects of war, when determining if genocide is being committed, excess deaths provide shaky ground on which to make a legal argument.

By Spring 2005, several organizations had conducted their own mortality studies that produced divergent results: World Health Organization (WHO) tallies 45,000 to 80,000 total deaths, with between 35,000-70,000 excess deaths; Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CERD), affiliated with WHO, “calculated the number of excess deaths...at 118,412”; US State Department’s numbers range from 63,000 to 146,000; Coalition for International Justice (CIJ), a now-defunct NGO partnership financed by the State Department to supplement its own internal investigation, claimed 396,563 total casualties; Eric Reeves maintained a running count on his website that reached 400,000 by the end of 2004, and fluctuated from as low as 300,000 up to 500,000 over the course of the next two years (Mamdani 2009a, 26-28); and in April 2005, Save Darfur Coalition began using the 400,000 figure, “a claim based on its previous research and an analysis of other data” (Foley 2008, 9).

The National Academy of Sciences and the Government Accountability Office (GAO), a respected nonpartisan body attached to the US government tasked with auditing many aspects of public life, undertook an expansive study to make sense of this muddle of statistics. Its 2006 report culminated in a thorough analysis of methods and findings of six sources and issued a broad condemnation: “The experts we consulted did not consistently rate any of the death estimates as having a high level of accuracy” (United States Government Accountability Office 2006, 8). The report is sophisticated, consisting of quantitative and qualitative assessment of the numbers. Cross-referencing of the studies is difficult because of the difference in time frame, as well as the means of extrapolation used by each. GAO’s critique, in some respects, rested on an inability, necessarily, to compare different states within western Sudan or to properly account for death rates over time. As well, limits in existing population figures, lack of access to the affected areas, and the challenging conditions of collecting data in a conflict zone contributed to a host of problems. Some of the studies, including that of Reeves, were challenged for lack of objectivity, because they “were more characteristic of advocacy or journalistic material than of objective analysis” (United States Government Accountability Office 2006, 32). “Overall, the experts rated CRED’s estimates most highly in terms of data, methods, objectivity, and reporting of limitations” (United States Government Accountability Office 2006, 21). This would place the number of fatalities at 170,237 in the period September 2003 – January 2005, which includes baseline mortality (those that would have died anyway), refugee populations, and 141,800 excess deaths, yielding approximately 35,000 “violence-related deaths” (United States Government Accountability Office 2006, 20; Guha-Sapir and Degomme 2005, 35). It is important to

keep in mind, however, that the CRED report concludes that excess deaths “may be attributed directly as a consequence of the war” (Guha-Sapir and Degomme 2005, 35).

This conclusion is satisfying and unsatisfying. It presents, on the one hand, a reasonable approximation of deaths in Darfur during the peak period of violence (although since the rebel uprising began in February 2003, it would make sense to assume that CRED’s figures could be revised slightly higher). As well, the GAO report allows for a juxtaposition of the various numbers that had been bandied about in the media and in movement advertising. Yet, it does not solve the dilemma of whether or not genocide was either in progress or had occurred—nor was this its task. The report does not address the question of culpability, nor does it provide specific remarks on intentionality: excess deaths may (or may not) be a direct consequence of the war, but does this then compel the conclusion that they were part of a campaign “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” as the Convention demands?

By any metric, Darfur is, at least, unlike other genocides we have seen. It has been described as “a slow-motion genocide” and “genocide by attrition” (Cheadle and Prendergast 2007, 3; Quoting Mia Farrow in Crilly 2010, 180). But, does this match our impression of genocide? Clearly it is not Rwanda, where in 800,000 members of one ethnic group were executed by members of a rival faction in under one hundred days, at the command of a central authority. Neither is it the Nazi Holocaust or the Serbian campaign against Bosnians, both of which shook the world with its mechanization and systematic efficiency. Yet, even the discredited low estimates still represent tens of thousands of human beings killed at the behest of the state; tragic under any heading. If the regime is culpable in the excess deaths of over 140,000 individuals, is that sufficient

evidence for the accusation of genocide? These are enormously difficult questions for policymakers and activists to wrap their heads around, and to then operationalize in policy or in campaigns.

None of the most respected human rights NGOs—Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch—labeled the crisis in Darfur genocide (Crilly 2010, 181; Fake and Funk 2009, 16). In the view of one journalist: “Genocides do not wind down after a couple of years, as the slaughter had in Darfur. They end with the victory of one side or the other, when all the victims are dead or the perpetrators are defeated. *There is no such thing as half a genocide*” (Emphasis added; Crilly 2010, 182-183). This sentiment is a reflection based on the facts on the ground, as well as based on a certain conception, legal and historical, of what genocide looks like. Deviations from this image of genocide either compels a reshaping of the original, or it leads one to deny that the violence is in fact genocidal. Furthermore, in light of the UN Commission’s 2005 rejection of the claim of genocide and internal dissent within the broader human rights movement, the controversy created space for supporters of Khartoum to maneuver. “It would be more difficult for the Sudanese government to sidestep accusations of murder. Accusations of genocide allowed it all sorts of ways to get off the hook” (Crilly 2010, 182-183).

In 2007, the Save Darfur Coalition received a flood of donor money, well in excess of budget projections. Executive Director David Rubinstein “mounted a media blitz,” in the US and UK, with SDC’s British partner, Aegis Trust (Mamdani 2009a, 49). Plastering subway cars and billboards with images of an anonymous dark-skinned child, with wide, hopeful eyes, in the arms of a woman draped in a vivid orange cloth, Darfur

was forced into the fore. Print ads and television commercials provided a prominent media presence for the grassroots movement. However, despite the GAO's findings, the figure of 400,000 dead was ubiquitous (Mamdani 2009a, 48). This startling number was ruled to be inaccurate, yet continued as the official total. While inconsistencies may regularly go unnoticed in advertising, a pro-Khartoum constituency was ready and willing to exploit the inflated statistic.

The European-Sudanese Public Affairs Council (ESPAC), “an organization funded by Khartoum to defend its interests abroad,” filed a claim in the UK against Aegis Trust and SDC with the British Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) (Crilly 2010, 175). ESPAC challenged the merit of the figure and disputed the presentation of this number as fact. David Hoile, the Director of ESPAC, had self-published several monographs discrediting the anti-genocide movement and shifting attention to the role of the rebel groups in Darfur.<sup>6</sup> ASA evaluated the challenge, based on the GAO report and on letters submitted from researcher Dr. John Hagan, the Northwestern University sociologist responsible for the figure of 400,000 as reported originally by the Coalition for International Justice. Conclusively, the ASA decided that SDC's claims were in violation of standards of advertising and must, theretofore, qualify their figures as opinion, rather than as matters of fact. While not registering in the American media and

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<sup>6</sup> Titles include *The Media and Darfur: Sensationalism and Irresponsibility*; *The Extremist Roots of the Darfur Rebellion*; and *Darfur, Human Rights and Hypocrisy* and all are available free of charge via download from ESPAC's website. Hoile is a notorious figure in British conservative politics with a history of support for authoritarian Cold War regimes in Angola, Mozambique, and Nicaragua (Rose 1986). As a leader of the Federation of Conservative Students in the mid-1980s, Hoile was condemned by members of the Tory party for his extremism and infamously wore a “Hang Mandela” sticker, while Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island (Borger 2007).

carrying no legal implications, pressure from this embarrassment complicated matters for Save Darfur (Foley 2008, 9).

This advertising push placed SDC at odds with their allies, as well as their enemies. By this time, the humanitarian relief effort in Darfur was the largest aid operation on the planet, due in large part to the advocacy of the Save Darfur Movement. The attention heaped on Darfur over these years contributed, not only to a heightened sense of political clamoring, but also to a boost in charitable donations. However, in 2007, as this media blitz reached critical mass, a backlash within the community caused tensions to rise. Vocal representatives from prominent aid agencies took issue with SDM on at least two fronts: first, the issue of the death tolls and the cause of death; second, the force-forward message in the advertising. Not only were the misleading figures embarrassing to those working on the ground, including to the extent it provided comfort to the Bashir government, but the campaign projected an image of a conflict fraught with violence. Instead, as relief workers witnessed, the leading killer in 2005-2007 was “diarrhoeal diseases and malaria,” not guns or machetes (Flint and De Waal 2008, 186). Which is why SDC’s call for a no-fly zone over Darfur was so illogical from the perspective of humanitarianism: the same measures that would prevent military planes from flying, would also prevent aid drops from continuing, threatening the viability of the operations underway. Furthermore, relief organizations worried that increasing the military presence in Darfur, as SDC proposed through its calls for a multilateral peacekeeping force, could also have unintended consequences for peace and stability.

This tension was exposed in public in 2007 in a series of letters and press statements. Sam Worthington, of InterAction, wrote to SDC in strong terms: “I am deeply

concerned by the inability of Save Darfur to be informed by the realities on the ground and to understand the consequences of your proposed actions” (Mamdani 2009a, 50). Not only did InterAction take issue with the content of the advocacy, but also the way in which SDC purports to speak for the greater human rights and humanitarian community. “[It] was clear that a rift had opened up between the organizations working in the region and those lobbying for it from the outside” (Foley 2008, 11). Regarding the use of force, supporters were generally at odds over the proper response to the conflict. Aid providers rested on the possibility of a negotiated peace settlement, while more hawkish wings of the Save Darfur movement urged, from the outset, for an intervention of some sort—either by a multilateral, UN-sanctioned force, or even through unilateral action if necessary. “The tension between aid and advocacy is not unique to the Darfur conflict, though it is almost always papered over by the code of silence that governs relations among nonprofit groups” (Strom and Polgreen 2007). The public nature of this tussle is a testament to the high profile of the cause and of the actors.

Despite the hostility, however, “the relationship is also symbiotic” (Strom and Polgreen 2007). Aid groups benefit a great deal from the work of advocacy groups in making an issue out of what would otherwise be an overlooked crisis. Without the advertising and the celebrities, Darfur would be just another African disaster. However, between the GAO report, condemnation by the British advertising board, and deepening tensions among allies, stakeholders began to question whether this advertising campaign had served the interests of the organizations involved and the cause at the center of it all. David Rubenstein was forced to resign his post at the Save Darfur Coalition in June, replaced eventually by founding member Jerry Fowler (Strom and Polgreen 2007). The

2007 media drive marked the height of a broader strategy that utilized high-powered marketing firms to craft a brand for an organization, and place the cause on the international agenda. While outreach is a constant component of human rights campaigns, Save Darfur bore the mark of the corporate advertising firms it contracted, and whose effectiveness as a tool for human rights is brought into question in the wake of these controversies.

### Advertising as Outreach

The considerable influx of cash in Fiscal Year 2007 (October 1, 2006 – September 30, 2007) presented an incredible opportunity for Save Darfur, allowing the organization to spend six times what it had the previous year.<sup>7</sup> A retrospective look at the strategies the movement executed in its four years of existence reveals a glaring reliance on advertising tactics rather than a range of other possible outlets for spending on advocacy, such as lobbying efforts, organizing and coalition building, campaign strategy, media relations, support of other organizations, or sponsorship of local initiatives.<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, it becomes possible to identify a central motivation, or logic, to the strategies employed by Save Darfur and their emphasis on advertising as a method. There was a decisive push toward a mass approach to make support for Darfur a mainstream view among the public. While an equally reasonable approach might have compelled

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<sup>7</sup> The analysis of the financial standing and expenses of the Save Darfur Coalition in this section is based on calculations by the author of the publically available Forms 990 submitted to the US Internal Revenue Service, 2004-2009.

<sup>8</sup> Amidst the tension between SDC and humanitarian organizations, a critique was widely circulated that SDC could be spending its troves of funding on relief work, that is feeding, clothing, and healing suffering people. That seems to be a frustrated expression voiced by humanitarian workers that blurs the division of labor between advocacy and aid. However, too common is the reciprocal call from the advocacy community that blames aid workers for not being more vocal and more politically engaged.



organizers to target niche constituencies or specific decision makers, the desire to bring a human rights message to the broadest demographic is based on the memory of past genocides and draws its inspiration from a particular origin.

What is striking in interviews and testimonies from movement architects, spiraling from John Prendergast outward, is the centrality of a mantra taken from a singular source: Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (2007). Power, through her deft chronicle of twentieth-century genocides from the perspective of American policymakers, argues that mass atrocity was permitted to take place over and over again due to a lack of political will within the governments of the great power. Therefore, she concludes, should civil society exact costs from elected officials for their inaction, the necessary will could be generated to halt crimes against humanity in progress or even prevent them from beginning. Throughout the book, members of Congress and State Department desk officers attest to this with remarks that suggest a degree of democracy in foreign policy that runs contrary to common conception. US Senator Paul Simon stated this clearly when the Rwandan genocide was at a precipice: "If every member of the House and Senate had received 100 letters from people back home...when the crisis was first developing, then I think the response would have been different" (Samantha Power 2007, 377). Anthony Lake, National Security Advisor, echoed these sentiments: "If you want to make this move [to send troops and stop massacres], you will have to change public opinion... You must make more noise" (Samantha Power 2007, 377).

A significant strength of Power's work is its ability to get behind the façade of "we didn't know about it," when in fact there has been high-level cognizance of the

major genocides she covers. As a result, her reporting has left a legacy among readers with regards to the second step in the equation: once we know about atrocities, we must "make noise" until we are heard, loud and clear. There is a final corollary to this advice, which is that if civil society makes enough noise, democratically elected officials will alter their stances and elevate human rights as a foreign policy priority. This is a forceful sentiment. It empowers citizens to become engaged in human rights activism, in the defense of the dignity and security of innocents. It effectively knocks elites down off their pedestals, and places popular decision making within reach. It diminishes the status of geopolitical relationships and grants individuals access to the problems of the world, yet from a distance. With this driving impetus, the architects of the Save Darfur Movement made every attempt to mobilize compassionate citizens and amplify their collective calls for the protection of civilians in Darfur. Should they succeed in gathering a critical mass of supporters behind the cause, Power's prophecy would be realized and the people of Darfur would in fact be saved. Toward this end, the movement deployed the tools of the twenty-first century marketing industry in the service of human rights.

Public relations, campaign management, and grassroots mobilization were outsourced through the contracting of independent firms for whom Save Darfur became a client. The organization itself operated with a skeletal, stripped-down staff while much of the work was facilitated through these networked companies. M+R Strategic Services were on board as early as August 2005 and responsible for "providing communications, online advocacy, fundraising and advertising, and event planning services" (M+R Strategic Services 2011a). With an emphasis on the public interest, M+R's clients are non-profit organizations, labor unions, and philanthropic foundations, including Oxfam

America, Human Rights Campaign, American Diabetes Association, Service Employees International Union, and the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The firm projects itself as a synthesis of traditional grassroots activism and cutting edge social media techniques. Boasting its success in capturing media attention and raising the profile of the Save Darfur Movement, M+R quantifies awareness raised in terms of listserv figures, attendance at mass rallies, online postcards sent, and dollars raised. Also associated with New York lobbying firm Malkin and Ross, M+R Strategic Services is a player in the area of issue-based communication in the US (this information found throughout the firm's website, [www.mrss.com](http://www.mrss.com)). The president of M+R, Bill Wasserman, occupied the role of interim executive director of Save Darfur in between the tenures of Rubenstein and Fowler, leading critics to "raise questions about conflict of interest involved in the board hiring a consultant as the manager of its organization" (Mamdani 2009a, 23).

As the campaign ramped up, another significant contract was extended to Weber Shandwick, a global public relations firm. While this contract constituted a lower-tiered expense relative to M+R and GMMB (below), Weber Shandwick is an award-winning agency recognized for its prominence and influence in the field. Its client list includes an impressively wide range of corporations from Pepsi, American Airlines and ExxonMobil, to Microsoft, KFC and Johnson & Johnson (Bush 2010). Weber's brand communication emphasizes new attempts to humanize corporations in the eyes of consumers through efforts in social responsibility, corporate citizenship, and environmental consciousness. With offices in seventy-seven countries, Weber Shandwick is actually a subsidiary

company of the Interpublic Group and, as of July 2010, was registering quarterly earnings of over \$1.6 billion (Morrison 2010).

However, over the course of the period under evaluation, the highest amount of total money, as well as the greatest proportion of the budget, was spent at GMMB, a “political consulting and advocacy advertising firm.” The agency runs campaigns for organizations on malaria prevention, youth tobacco use, methamphetamine abuse, and cancer awareness. In the electoral arena, GMMB’s clients include prominent Democratic members of Congress, such as Senators Barbara Boxer and Harry Reid, President Bill Clinton, and South African President Nelson Mandela. But, the most recent victory for GMMB was the campaign for president of Barack Obama. Personnel have moved fluidly from the campaign team and the Administration, into GMMB since 2008 (post-dating its involvement with SDC). A full service agency, GMMB oversees all processes of its campaigns, from grassroots organizing and strategy development, to digital marketing and video production. GMMB is owned by its parent company Omnicom Group, and its stock is held by Fleishman-Hillard, a global behemoth of advertising, second only to Weber Shandwick (Holmes Report 2010).

In 2007, Save Darfur Coalition spent \$32,982,042 on its contract with GMMB, or over 64 percent of its total expenses for that year. In the following year, the amount spent on advertising was below 7 percent, and by 2009 the media blitz was effectively over. Along with sizeable investments in strategic consulting and other areas of public relations, Save Darfur was in business with high profile firms from the corporate world and major movers in the domestic political arena. These are companies with proven track records of successful brand management and execution of advertising campaigns. The

question remains, however, whether success in these other fields translates to an effective resolution of a human rights crisis, which in turn pivots on the goals of the movement. If the goals are to brand an organization, promote its name and its mission, and generally raise the profile of the cause, then we can deem this campaign victorious.

If, on the other hand, SDC's objectives are met by

- ending the violence against civilians;
- facilitating adequate and unhindered humanitarian aid;
- establishing conditions for the safe and voluntary return of displaced people to their homes;
- promoting the long-term sustainable development of Darfur; and
- holding the perpetrators accountable,

as declared in the Unity Statement (Save Darfur Coalition 2004), then a) advertising agencies are not particularly well suited to these tasks, and b) Save Darfur did not accomplish its goals. There is an implicit line drawn from the public branding of an organization to its efficacy, and, it would seem, this is a false correlation in the human rights world. In the corporate world, one can make such correlations with confidence. Consumers' decisions are closely tied to product recognition, familiarity, and reputation. However, consumers and activists do not have equivalent motivations, nor act the same way, and politics is not a marketplace. The confusion expressed by Save Darfur in conflating the two is a symptom of the social and cultural milieu of the 2000s.

To be sure, this conclusion is not drawn spuriously or disingenuously. Writing of several conversations with a central movement architect, Don Cheadle exposes this logic:

In my many discussions with John [Prendergast] about outreach, ways to widen the circle of influence where Darfur was concerned, we had often broached the idea of 'branding' activism, tying in the spirit of social justice with an easily recognizable and perhaps even popular outward symbol of such. At first blush, it may sound counterintuitive to combine the crisis of genocide in Darfur with the concept of being cool, but

imagine the possibilities if such a marriage did exist...Activism and fashion needn't be mutually exclusive...why not take this opportunity to create a righteous blend?" (Cheadle and Prendergast 2007, 148)

This is a strategy that was sought after and realized through the medium of advertising. By plastering public space with slogans, and logos, SDC leadership believed that they could raise awareness and awaken consciousness to the suffering in Darfur. By placing this responsibility in the hands of professional image makers, such as contractors M+R Strategic Services, Weber Shandwick, and GMMB, Save Darfur gambled on the idea that successful communication of some messages translate regardless of the substance of the message.

M+R claims responsibility for the repeal of the US military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy that prohibited gay and lesbian service members from serving openly, because the firm was contracted with Human Rights Campaign in the year leading up to repeal. Weber Shandwick is the firm that directed the rebranding of Kentucky Fried Chicken to bring the fast food store up to speed with current health trends. Now known as KFC, the store began to offer grilled chicken, in addition to its traditional fried chicken (Bush 2010). KFC can market itself as a nutritious option in a market that has, in light of an epidemic of obesity and heart disease, begun to consider less fattening possibilities for dinner. As well, GMMB would go on to engineer the most dynamic candidacy in recent US election history when Barack Obama was transformed from a one term senator with a Muslim-sounding name born to a Kenyan father and white mother, into the nation's first black president. These three cases are simple examples of uphill battles waged in the arena of messaging and advertising by associates of SDC. However, they are also instances in which a distorted vision of the truth is sold to the public.

While M+R served a function, for a consulting firm to champion its role in the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” is to neglect the sacrifice of those officers and activists who risked their personal security and professional lives to see this policy undone—the fact that M+R produced viral videos or enlisted online supporters supplemented the grassroots campaign that was waged over the course of the previous fifteen years (M+R Strategic Services 2011b). KFC, regardless of its packaging, is not a health-conscious dinner option in no uncertain terms. While President Obama advances many policies faithful to his campaign, it should come as no surprise to the left-wing of the Democratic party that his adherence to principles of “hope” and “change” extends only as far as the mire of politics allows. This critique is to underscore the fact that branding is a projection of reality; it is not reality itself. Advertising is conducted to sway public opinion behind a product. Crafting an image or a brand is an attempt to change the persona of the subject in the eyes of the audience. When advertising becomes a substitute for traditional forms of outreach, the substance of the message is transformed. In the case of Save Darfur, advertising affected the communication of the truth, costing the movement credibility and casting its supporters not as activists, but as consumers.

In a fleeting comment about the 2006 rallies, Rebecca Hamilton and Chad Hazlett write about the campaign to send President Bush one million postcards advocating for action in Darfur: “Beyond the numerical signaling, the campaign was a much-needed organizing tool: it gave activists something to *do*” (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 357). Without making too much of the semantics, this observation is either an oxymoron or gets to the heart of the problem. If activists are not *doing* anything, they are just cheerleaders or wallflowers. In the cultivation of an activist base for the Save Darfur

Movement, the architects sought after a brand for their organization, media attention, and throngs of supporters. However, the movement they designed and executed demanded little of these supporters, besides their presence. The advertising campaign effectively mobilized people to become involved by attending rallies and, in some cases, contacting elected officials on the matter. However, somewhere along the way, the advertising became an end in itself rather a means to a greater end.

### **The Corporate Makeover of Human Rights**

#### **Bumper Sticker Activism**

The campaign developed and executed by the Save Darfur Movement owes its form both to the cultural memory of past genocides, as well as to the involvement of corporate advertising agencies. As energy focused on building a constituency for this crisis, branding techniques were utilized to convey a clear and attractive message to the audience: there is a genocide in progress in Africa, innocent people are dying by state violence, and you can help these people. In light of the current investigation, it seems that none of these statements are obviously true. The label of genocide is a controversial one that major authorities (UN, AI, HRW, MSF) deliberately chose not to deploy; violence was not the worst killer, nor was the state the only guilty party; and it remains unclear what could have been done to tourniquet the suffering. Military intervention is the least desirable option, yet constituted the loudest issue heard from Save Darfur activists. Without doubt, the Save Darfur Movement is a landmark phenomenon in recent human rights history, however its legacy should give observers great pause.

A fear in hindsight is that the overwhelming compulsion to attract supporters caused the message to degenerate into a simplistic catchphrase that could fit neatly onto a



bumper sticker. This bumper sticker, in turn, could be affixed to an activist's car, by which she can be identified publically as part of the movement. As she drives through town and even across state lines, the movement to save Darfur is popularized as other drivers see the logo and read the slogan and, maybe, search out ways to get involved too. Certainly this is the way that corporations see advertising—as a viral force to familiarize a broad range of people with their product. Furthermore, when a status or value is attached to the brand, its desirability is perpetuated and reproduced. In the context of Darfur, this was achieved: the crisis became the cause célèbre of the moment and possessed a prestige that drew people in. The ability for a driver in another car to see the bumper sticker, connect the slogan or name to a celebrity, and then finally to the issue—or at least some version of the issue—mimics the branding strategy of a corporation.

To reiterate, the claim is that this did not happen by coincidence; branding of the anti-genocide movement was a deliberate strategy. By 2007, pride in the brand was expressed in the letter distributed as part of the search for a new executive director: “In three years, the name, ‘Save Darfur,’ has become the brand for the Darfur anti-genocide movement” (Mamdani 2009a, 23). In creating the student organization, STAND “produced something of lasting value—a brand name” (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 3345). Throughout much of the literature and journalistic coverage of the movement, this kind of language is repeated sometimes as a strength and sometimes as a weakness. Its strength would be the brand's capacity to breed familiarity and legitimacy. Its weakness would be the way in which this same legitimacy was sacrificed in order to attract supporters and bolster its numbers.

Critics are baffled by the inversely proportionate relationship between advertising and truth: “For the Save Darfur Coalition, advocacy had turned into a series of advertisements... The more advocacy turned into a sales-pitch, the less the ads corresponded to reality on the ground. Yet the mobilization continued with increasing success.” (Mamdani 2009a, 51). The chasm between the actual facts and the advertised facts (casualty figures, causes of death) is confusing and cannot reasonably be determined to have been simply a giant mistake. Branding the movement created a context in which numbers could be stretched, which must also indicate that the actual facts were seen to be insufficient to motivate citizens to action. Deaths from diarrhea and malaria are not as sexy or glamorous as deaths from armed conflict. While 200,000 dead people, by any means, sounds like a catastrophe, unrevised tallies of 400,000 remained on all posters long after they had been refuted. In these cynical times, when consumers have come to expect a certain level of duplicity from companies trying to sell products and increase market share, even the most jaded among us does not expect exaggeration from a presumably reputable human rights organization. We assume accuracy and credibility from those groups working to address moral causes, not to be taken advantage of by actors fighting the good fight.

This being the case, what is the relationship between the central organization of the movement and the supporters? Critics of the marketing strategy claim “Save Darfur relates to its constituency... as would an ambitious advertiser” and that their preoccupation with “merchandizing, and establishing their claim as the default organization” affected their judgment in making policy prescriptions (Mamdani 2009b; Eric Reeves quoted in Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 344). In conjuring a constituency of

activists through the deployment of bumper sticker slogans, there is recognition of the short attention span of the consumption-oriented audience member. There is a low threshold of expectation placed on the “activist,” which is then reinforced by the bumper sticker approach. Mark Hanis, co-founder of GI-Net says explicitly: “If you can’t get someone to do something in five minutes, you’ve failed in a key way of organizing” (Preston 2006, 32). This would seem to fly in the face of any mass movement from history, be it the anti-Vietnam war movement in the US, the 1968 student movements in Europe, or pro-democracy uprisings in China, Iran, or Egypt. But, it also is a genuine expression of the way organizers approached the crisis in Darfur by crafting a movement to suit the twenty-first century consumer.

### Save Darfur: The Brand

If, then, these uncomfortable elements that emerged from the Save Darfur Movement are products of the branding process, what are the brand’s qualities? I suggest the brand rests on three pillars: the pronouncement of genocide, an emotional appeal for the suffering, and advocacy from a position of strength. These elements, as mentioned above, were central to the communication that materialized during the height of the advertising push in 2007, but also guided the messaging in the movement’s early years. Glaringly, these three characteristics were among the most distorted points to be expressed through the movement’s various channels, and evidence a correlation between branding and misinformation.

The declaration that there was a genocide in Darfur was an invaluable component of the campaign. There is a certitude that accompanies the term genocide, a gravitas that dwarfs other forms of conflict and crisis. It is what separates Darfur from the Congo, Uganda, or even Afghanistan—pre-packaging the conflict into a category the public could absorb and understand without complication. Describing Darfur as a counterinsurgency campaign waged by the regime removes it from the ethnic/racial realm and risks confusing it with other similar wars, like the one raging contemporaneously in Iraq that rivaled Darfur in war-related deaths (Mamdani 2007). The label, when applied to Darfur, at once distinguished it from one sub-category, while transferring it to another, more infamous category: “This was not just another African war... This was a genocide” (Crilly 2010, 168). Darfur therefore belonged in the same unambiguous category as Rwanda and Nazi-occupied Europe, not Somalia or Angola. Journalists, as powerful conjurers of public opinion, latched onto “genocide” for use as a headline. Broadcasters could repeat the label in a quick bite. “Stop Genocide” looks better on a t-shirt than “Stop this Confusing Conflict between Groups Whose Interests We Do Not Fully Understand, in which Thousands of People Are Dying of Diarrhea.” Mamdani argues repeatedly that the activism around Darfur refused to appreciate context, when in fact, I would argue, it had a keen appreciation for contextualization—however, it selected the wrong context.

*New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof, who was a prominent figure in the communication of the Darfur brand, complained that individuals were more likely to feel sympathy for a “a suffering puppy with big eyes and floppy ears” than for human victims of violence (Kristof 2007). However, in certain terms, the label of genocide was the “Darfur puppy” (Crilly 2010, 167). It prefigured the way the audience would feel about

the conflict and presumed a certain response. In actuality, as early as 2004, Kristof was sounding the alarm that “ethnic cleansing” was underway because of the way the term rang loudly in the ears of those who recalled Bosnia and Rwanda (plus, it is a simpler distinction to make than genocide) (Crilly 2010, 168). Genocide is unmatched in its reputation as the crime of all crimes and invoking that reputation, for the Save Darfur Movement, was central to its branding strategy.

Directly related to the label of genocide is the emotional weight it carries. The emotional reaction to the crisis was based on the ability to humanize the victims and personalize the brutality. Such was the case, for instance, in a *60 Minutes* story that originally aired in 2006, in which John Prendergast and correspondent Scott Pelley tracked down a child named Jacob, whose notebook had been found amidst the ash and rubble at a razed village in Darfur. While the story is a touching one, and focuses on the human side of the crisis, even when it was updated and re-aired in 2008 did it frame the story as part of the continuing genocide (Efran 2008). The category of genocide, coupled with personal stories and images of horror, motivated the psychological current that urged audience members to take part. This was the role of the ghastly statistics as well. “Their object is to wake up, even to alarm, those used to being assailed by advertising and news media—constantly breaking news—on a daily basis” (Mamdani 2009a, 20). “Shock and awe” are powerful motivators and allow the public, at least temporarily, to make sense of a diverse set of world problems based on an emotional attachment to its victims (Crilly 2010, 174).

However, there is a tension between the moral imperative to assist those suffering and political impediments that naturally lie in the path of righteousness. Some argue, like

other humanitarian catastrophes before it, “the moral outrage which was felt tended to overshadow, if not hide completely, the political nature of the problem” (Prunier 2007, 128). It is one thing to feel a certain way about a problem, and will it to be otherwise; it is quite another for a moral sentiment to transcend power and politics. The greatest fear would be for morality to impair judgment as an actor, or a movement, engages in problem solving, and critics believe that is exactly what happened for SDM. Supporters were asked to react to a moral awareness, a common humanity, divorced from the troubles of politics. “Save Darfur’s great political victory has been to thoroughly depoliticize Darfur as an issue” (Mamdani 2009a, 60).

This analysis helps, therefore, explain the third pillar of the branding strategy: the pursuit of a policy based on coercion. Economic sanctions, military intervention, and criminal charges all topped the agenda of the Save Darfur Movement at different moments. From a communication perspective, these ends personified an image of strength, of authority, and of command. These were not idealistic hippy activists, unfamiliar with geopolitics, daunted by the harsh words of a dictator. Advocates for Darfur projected a persona of forcefulness and relevance, and refused to be relegated to the margins of foreign policy. Yet, strategic calculations did not lead the movement to appeal for mediated negotiations between Khartoum and the rebels, which, in hindsight, seems like a reasonable approach that reflects the roots cause of the suffering. Instead, Save Darfur sought to cripple Omar al-Bashir by all means and to assert the prominence of the citizen movement. The use of force was the initial imperative of the Genocide Intervention Network, with its desire to fund troops and even send unmanned drone planes—a tool with dubious legal standing and highly questionable moral consequences,

especially from a human rights stance (Zengerle 2006). Through multiple expressions of the movement, Save Darfur often appeared like a “war mobilization,” with the slogan “Boots on the Ground!” regularly heard at rallies and mass events (Mamdani 2009b). The indictment of al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court was also an attempt by the movement to flex its muscle and fan its plumage, even if it came at the expense of humanitarian aid provision—another move that angered relief agencies and performed a disservice to the key objective of minimizing suffering (Charbonneau 2009).

The insistence on the use of coercive tactics demonstrates, not a depoliticized approach, but an overpoliticized approach to conflict resolution. In a sense, the reliance on force-forward measures produces a “site where the language of genocide has been turned into an instrument. It is where genocide has become ideological” (Mamdani 2009a, 8). A vacillation between the apolitical and the overly political occurred frequently throughout the branding of the movement. At once, the appeal to emotion generated compassionate and charitable responses—the kind that drives donations during a natural disaster recovery effort. However, SDC cultivated an emotional response from the audience and converted it into a rallying cry for military action. Posturing of this sort is usually associated with states, such as the march to war in Iraq to the extent it was billed as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That a human rights organization or movement parroted the tactics of the Bush administration in its messaging and advertising is symptomatic of a deep disconnect between means and ends, between the message and political action. The brand was never transcended in favor of the ends for which it was designed: to politicize civil society and exact political costs from elected officials for inaction.

### **Conclusion: Professionalization or Perversion?**

In late 2010, the Genocide Intervention Network, which had already absorbed STAND, merged with the Save Darfur Coalition. The desire to establish a permanent constituency to combat genocide and mass atrocity will be realized. “The merger creates the largest anti-genocide organization that combined, boasts a membership base of over 800,000 committed activists globally, an unparalleled nationwide student movement, and a network of institutional investors with over \$700 billion in assets under management” (Brown 2010). Along with the ENOUGH Project, founded in 2007 by John Prendergast and Gayle Smith, powerful institutional support for human rights has emerged in the wake of the movement to save Darfur (Cheadle and Prendergast 2007, 194-195). These efforts have turned to address a range of issues including the upcoming South Sudanese secession, mass rapes in the Congo, and the role of conflict minerals in financing warfare in East Africa. While “the ‘Save Darfur’ movement has stalled” (Kristof 2009), its progeny continues to evolve and confront human rights abuse in new ways.

The intention of those like Hanis of GI-Net was to mimic other successful interest groups in US politics in creating these new organizations, like the Sierra Club, the American Association for Retired People and the National Rifle Association (Hamilton and Hazlett 2007, 354; Preston 2006, 32). While Hanis is new to this scene, veterans like Prendergast and Colin Thomas-Jensen have for time understood the necessity to develop a permanent constituency to maintain pressure:

After the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Srebrenica, small waves of advocacy efforts came and went, but each time, activists had to reinvent the wheel. The current movement, which is far stronger and broader than any of its predecessors, has the opportunity to make this a permanent effort to not



only respond to Darfur and other similarly egregious crises, but to build institutional capacity and will to prevent future outbreaks of mass atrocities. (Thomas-Jensen and Spiegel 2008, 214)

To facilitate the transition from crisis to crisis, these new types of organizations have developed relationships with policy makers and activists that they hope will continue over time. A cottage industry of companies has blossomed to serve the needs of NGOs in the areas of campaign design, advertising, and grassroots mobilizations, such as those described above.

Some observers have recognized this transformation and refer to it as “the professionalization of human rights” (Kennedy 2005, 27; Land 2009, 206).

Professionalization entails the involvement of experts, scientists, lawyers, and others that are essentially outside of the caricatured frame of grassroots activist. The total picture that emerges is of a dynamic force, employing the services of trained people to provide credibility to the movement; but not credibility in image alone. Professionals, ostensibly, are able to gather information and file challenges in ways that laypeople cannot, which strengthens the claims of human rights movements. However, there is a concern that the professionalization of human rights is “distancing the human rights discourse from ordinary individuals and thereby robbing the movement of its ability to capture the imagination of the public and to ensure accountability to important constituencies” (Land 2009, 207). Save Darfur seems to have avoided falling into this particular trap, yet its own version of professionalization has set up other obstacles.

In addition to scientists and lawyers, “most British and American aid agencies now have sizeable media and advocacy departments whose work is based on, and essentially funded by, their operational programs. Press offices and lobbyists are

employed to highlight particular crises and make the public care about them” (Foley 2008, 14-15). Save Darfur introduced, to the fullest extent to date, the employment of professional communications experts and advertising executives into the human rights universe. Unleashing corporate branding on human rights had decidedly Janus-faced results: hundreds of thousands of citizens were drawn to a movement that sought to ameliorate the suffering of vulnerable people in a far away country, while operating with faulty data, suspicious categories, and questionable objectives. The marketing campaign became an end in itself, rather than a means to other ends. “Their generalizations have helped raise awareness of the slaughter, but polarized the search for answers” (Crilly 2010, xv). Advertising may be a necessary, but insufficient, condition for a twenty-first century human rights movement.

This tension complicates the legacy of the movement, but explains its shortcomings. A high profile advertising blitz is not a substitute for political follow through that appreciates historical context and facts on the ground. The throngs of supporters attracted by the logo and the slogan were never committed to engagement on behalf of Darfur, but were satisfied to be identified with its brand. While elites within the movement had access to policymakers and frequently lobbied for their attention, the grassroots were not mobilized to do anything other than attend an annual rally or wear a t-shirt. Supporters were attracted by the cultural currency of “Save Darfur,” but were not effectively leveraged as a force for compelling political will. Instead, they were conditioned to be gleeful when Bush or Powell used the term “genocide,” despite never having any intention of intervening in any manner. The movement was able to be manipulated because it was never constituted with the political fortitude to challenge and

overcome the rhetoric. As recipients of the branding campaign, advocates were not politicized in a meaningful way, but were merely associated as if through a commercial relationship.

Moving forward, observers reflect on Save Darfur as “a move beyond the old apolitical style of humanitarianism and also beyond the class approach of human rights organizations, which don’t explicitly deal with questions of political power” (De Waal 2009). Even Mahmood Mamdani, a vociferous and harsh critic of the movement, is able to recognize SDC’s contribution:

The Save Darfur Coalition represents a New Age organization that joins the voluntary effort of foot soldiers characteristic of lass cause-driven movements (such as the Vietnam-era antiwar movement) with advertising skills honed by highly paid professional advertising firms, all under the tight supervisions of a select and small, politically driven and charged, executive committee. Save Darfur is undoubtedly the most successful organized popular movement in the United States since the movement against the Vietnam War. (Mamdani 2009a, 70)

The fervor around Darfur, from the elite levels of SDC’s decision making to the local high school chapters, is a promising testament to what is possible. Despite the eruption of civil society activity, however, the consequences of Save Darfur activism did not halt violence, at times accentuated human suffering, and entrenched the power of a brutal dictator. The concern remains if the model developed by Save Darfur does not rely too heavily on the corporate world for its techniques and its standards of achievement. Even in the aftermath of the movement’s peak, the organizations that had grown throughout the 2000s chose to follow the corporate example by consolidating operations, outsourcing essential jobs, and depending on their brand to transcend the reality of their weak product.

## **CHAPTER 5 – RECLAIMING POLITICS: THE FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM**

*“To sympathize in the way that the television images invite us all to do is not difficult. It is with the question of how that sympathy can be translated into action that the problems arise” – David Rieff (2003, 34)*

### **Introduction**

The dissertation set out to explore the reasons why the global human rights movement is unable to politicize its supporters, through an investigation into the role played by popular culture in the incubation, design, and execution of human rights campaigns. From its outset, this project hypothesized that the strategies human rights organizations use in recruitment, fundraising, and advocacy are responsible for establishing a connection with the public that frames the way average people engage with the human rights movement. What emerged from the research was a series of episodes detailing the development of a generalized consciousness largely tied to pop culture processes, rather than the political content of human rights. However, while human rights was certainly packaged with mass appeal, the cases did not give credence to the unfiltered viewpoint that mass activity facilitated through patterns of consumerism necessarily produced hollow, diluted expressions of commitment to human rights. As critical theory suggests, market-based social initiatives should suffer from weak ties and limited impact because of the collapsing effect on alternative perspectives in the one-dimensional society. Progressive causes, like human rights, should be done a disservice

through their interaction with late-/post-industrial capitalism, to the extent it is a system that relegates and co-opts challenges to the status quo. Yet, the chapters evidence a less straight-forward relationship between human rights and consumer venues that requires a subtle and nuanced unpacking, in order to distill lessons learned.

A central conclusion drawn from the cases indicates that popular culture can serve as a useful method for awakening concern for human rights in the audience, but translating awareness into politicized engagement is neither natural nor simple through commercial media. More so, at times the reactions provoked among the public proved to have net negative effects due to their susceptibility to manipulation by elites and the fleeting and fickle nature of these emotional attitudes. Therefore, the most optimistic takeaway from this broad narrative is to say that the potential exists for transforming this superficial form of human rights engagement into political activism. Through these stories it is clear that a latent sensibility exists in ordinary people that lends itself to feelings of cosmopolitanism and solidarity with suffering strangers. Celebrity endorsement, graphic imagery, and corporate advertising can rouse this dormant potential, but improving upon the bonds created by these platforms and channeling this energy into political action may demonstrate to be a task too great for the medium to bear.

A goal in this chapter is to determine what the global human rights movement is and what it is not. In order to do so, the structure of this chapter rests on framing concepts introduced in Chapter One and explored in each episode in detail. A central set of variables explored in this research includes the *motivation*, *expression* and *commitment* of those individuals that participate in human rights campaigns. The cases present multiple

and overlapping explanations for the appearance of these variables. We find that people are motivated by combinations of emotional sentimentality, moral outrage, and political protest, each of which appeal to distinct underlying values. Expressions of human rights activism often swing pendulously on the spectrum from charity to solidarity, yielding insights about the relationship between human rights and humanitarianism. Individuals' commitment to human rights causes, however, is the weakest and most elusive element in this series. Brief discussions of recent events bring the question of commitment up to date and illustrate ways in which the human rights movement has faltered, in part due to the strategies it has employed in the past.

The final objective of this chapter is to go beyond those strategies that were employed in the past and speculate about strategies not employed. Now that we have a sense of the constitution of the human rights movement it is important to determine how it could be otherwise, which will provide a hypothetical scenario in which to analyze alternative approaches to mass human rights activism. As an entry point into this possible-world analysis, I will reintroduce the dichotomy of self-determining and other-regarding human rights movements. Judging the relative differences of these two forms, from the perspective of the individual advocate, will explain the obstacles to creating an other-regarding movement with the politicization a self-determining movement; but, while overcoming these obstacles is not impossible, our expectations should be tempered from the beginning. In order to rise above its inherent limitations, the global human rights movement must transcend the dialectics laid out in this dissertation, reclaim politics, and reinvigorate the human rights community with a set of progressive guiding principles

based around cosmopolitan engagement in the world and solidarity with vulnerable populations.

### **Motivations**

The approach in the subsequent three mini-sections is to isolate the qualities that characterize the relationship between individuals and the human rights movement, as shaped by popular culture. With respect to motivations, three categories that appear and re-appear suggest something about the reasons why ordinary citizens participate in humanitarian action. There is sufficient evidence to indicate a hierarchy, or at least an ordering, of motivations that while neither static nor ever-present, occurs often enough to be analytically useful. This explanation is not beholden to an essentially causal relationship linking these categories, as if one flows from the previous one into the successive. However, the cases demonstrate how certain campaigns operate across all three stages, while some remain limited, to their detriment. Because other-regarding movements are already degrees separated from the first-hand realities of violence and suffering, understanding the motivations of actors is central to illuminating the extent of this relationship.

Emotional sentimentality, or the appeal to how one feels, is central in this instance, ranges from sadness to anger, and includes the psychological effects of the campaign itself on the audience. One aspect of this motivation is the experience a viewer has when a news story or image of human suffering comes into focus. In many respects, this response signifies the common humanity and universal dignity that each of us shares and, when confronted with the denial of such humanity, a natural reaction is to feel badly about it. Empathy is a component as well in as much as it fuels intersubjective

conceptions of suffering across traditional boundaries. Sentiment is not necessarily couched in rationality to the extent it is, in a sense, an involuntary response to stimuli, rather than a reasoned reply to argumentation. This is a more descriptive point than it is judgmental, but it does follow that the emotional motivation is accompanied by severe constraints. While the knee-jerk empathic response to graphic imagery of suffering, for instance, is a broadly common experience that speaks to a base human instinct, it is not inherently connected to action. Therefore, when an audience collectively witnesses the brutality of the Siege of Sarajevo in 1994, it is compelled by the coverage to feel grief or sadness, but those emotions do not entail any particular policy prescription. On the contrary, a reaction that is purely emotional stifles debate in favor of any fix that is quick and removes from vision images of devastation. Emotive impulses can be nurtured, cajoled, and translated into behavior that extends beyond one's own sensations, and, because they are so widespread, lend themselves to mass involvement. Yet, without deliberate direction, emotional sentimentality is a remarkably superficial and fleeting reaction to bad news and very likely to turn over when replaced by newer or worse news. Emotions may correspond with a certain set of moral values, but are not necessarily anchored by principle, which results in a drifting tendency that is most vulnerable to co-optation and involuntary shifts in popular trends.

Ethics feature heavily in human rights campaigns, as abuse is messaged and interpreted as infringement of standards of justice, fairness, and decency. Beyond empathy, moral outrage appeals to higher principles that govern human behavior. Such principles are encoded in domestic legal frameworks, or, in the absence of national laws, international laws stand in as authoritative. Human rights are only coherent within legal



frameworks and understanding law as the manifestation of morality falls in line with common parlance. Outside of the strictly legal context, breaches of moral conventions are seen as deviant and offensive, demanding retribution. In plainspoken language, when innocent people are subjected to indiscriminate violence or inhuman conditions, it is not just sad or unfortunate, but immoral. There is a deeper understanding of culpability that emotional pleas do not capture. However, moral critique does not necessarily contain a political dimension and, when it does not, outrage is generally directed as if at the heavens. That something immoral is happening is to curse the universe for not being otherwise. Appealing to justice, the advocate extends the situation beyond herself and her own sentiments and contextualizes suffering in broader terms. This position operates with the assumption that human welfare represents a vision of justice, and human suffering stands opposed to popular notions of justice. Grappling on new levels of abstraction permits insight into big picture questions about the exercise of power, but does not necessarily make the leap into the political realm where it will become possible to confront power and defend the vulnerable. Public outcry during the Ethiopian famine is most representative of the moral motivation because of the narrative's framing of victims as "innocent." While presumably the women and children pictured on television were largely uninvolved with the conflict in East Africa, the appeal to morality compelled the audience to donate to the cause and participate in its events. During Live Aid, concertgoers and fans acknowledged the correlation between moral injustice and the remedy being proposed. The conveners of Live Aid trafficked in moral outrage, but never in more overtly political ideas. In the world, in order to right what is wrong, it is

insufficient to simply assert that an act or a circumstance is immoral; it is essential to engage immoral behavior in the political domain.

Encompassing the emotional and moral drivers of human rights participation, political protest is the manifestation of the politicization of those participants. Through contact with human rights campaigns, some individuals undergo a fundamental transformation in the way they confront human rights abuse in the future. Going beyond the shallow emotional response and going deeper than the abstract appeal to injustice, when supporters become politicized, they develop from spectators and consumers into activists. For the politicized activist, the human rights experience is not situated in one's psychological self, neither is it a product of the cold, unjust, blameless world.

Recognizing that suffering does not just happen, and is not a natural human state, means identifying those responsible and holding them to account. Instead, a higher order process gains traction in which power is called into question and challenged. Political protest is a category that describes the individual as well as her interaction with the suffering of others. Political engagement represents the unity of means and ends in human rights activism: if abuse is the product of political mechanisms, then only political confrontation will end abuse. The Anti-Apartheid Movement is the clearest example of politicized activism throughout the dissertation. Its messaging and its methods empowered global activists to directly challenge the exercise of power at its core. Sob stories and moralizing were relegated to the fringe, while an urgent call was issued. Average people were politicized by the movement because of the substance of the campaign and the principles it championed. This linking of principle and action served the movement well and continues to provide the most promising example of politicized, grassroots, global human

rights activism. Advocates moved by high-minded abstract principles that fail to commit to principles in their action are not politicized, despite being engaged under other terms. The motivations of politicized actors carry with them force, weight, and a robustness that have proven to generate the expressions that are most effective in human rights struggles.

### **Expressions**

The instantiations of these motivations are expressed in various ways and generate profound lessons about the dynamic that emerges from one's experience of emotional sentimentality, moral outrage, or political protest. Throughout the dissertation, a spectrum of expression has set the parameters for human rights engagement, ranging from charity on one end to solidarity on the other. These categories link motivation and expression and describe the crucial bond between the advocate and the suffering stranger. These terms are in desperate need of analytical exploration and will help expose critical elements about the role of politics in activism.

Certainly, the chapters present evidence of human rights advocacy expressed as an act of charity—an altruistic gesture by Party A on behalf of Party B, who is suffering. Ostensibly, Party A is at least safe and secure, if not also well-to-do, while Party B is vulnerable. Notions of charity are inextricably linked to the history of humanitarianism initiated by Christian missionaries thought to be conducting God's work, bringing the Word to foreign people who were in need of support and assistance. Religious communities were at the core of historical predecessors to contemporary century human rights campaigns, such as the campaigns against slavery and the slave trade and for reform in the Congo. This is also the case for the contemporary movement, but the language of aiding the subaltern has evaporated in favor of a discourse of universality and

equality. From a public relations perspective, this is a useful development to the degree it creates distance between dignity-supportive campaigns and their paternalistic and patronizing roots. Charitable exercises of the nineteenth century were constituted by uncomfortable relations and too often cast in terms of enlightenment versus barbarism, a legacy that taints modern attempts at human rights activism. Transitioning away from a charity posture is a deliberate step to broaden the umbrella of human rights.

However, humanitarianism persists beyond its initial association with charity. Humanitarian relief consists of a range of aid work, from emergency provision to long-term development projects. Humanitarian assistance occurs in war zone, or after an earthquake or a drought. Emergencies do not have politics, humanitarians argue, insisting that neutrality guide their operations. Failure to be neutral may compromise their access to suffering people. Therefore, humanitarianism is often considered an apolitical approach to the protection of dignity and well-being. Without muddying itself in politics, humanitarian agencies can do their work and positively affect the situation as efficiently as possible. This approach has problems, one of the most glaring of which is to provide assistance to all people regardless of their identities or affiliations. In post-genocide Rwanda, this meant feeding and caring for perpetrators of unspeakable atrocities who had fled and were living in refugee camps in Chad. Yet, despite hiccups and mild inconsistencies, humanitarianism is the self-applied label of organizations seeking mass appeal specifically because of their common desire to evade political mire. During the Cold War, for instance, organizations described themselves as humanitarian to avoid the polarizing and partisan associations of “human rights.”

Since the end of the Cold War, human rights has supplemented humanitarianism as a component language of the NGO sector. Shedding the reputation—for better or for worse—of a disruptive, anti-establishment force, human rights is now a key component of the mission statements of a wide array of organizations, from traditional human rights organizations like Amnesty International, to historically humanitarian agencies like Oxfam. If aid relief groups have emphasized poverty alleviation in the past, they do so today with a rights-based approach, which provides unique currency and gravity to their mission. This is not true across the board, as many organizations like World Vision, Save the Children, and Catholic Relief Services continue to rely on their religious foundations for their identity, eschewing the more political implications attached to human rights. A new variation on this worn debate is the introduction of what has been called “Political Humanitarianism” (Foley 2008, 15), identified closely with Médecins sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors without Borders). Unsatisfied with providing aid on neutral grounds, MSF incorporates the imperative of witnessing in its work and asserts itself in ways other organizations refuse. This synthesis suggests the potential for a future organizational hybrid that combines advocacy and aid provision in a creative, pragmatic, and forward-thinking way.

Yet, due to the historical association with movements for self-determination, solidarity is also a familiar expression of human rights engagement. Solidarity is the assembly of a unified front for a political purpose and, in the context of human rights, this purpose revolves around the defense of dignity and welfare. Solidarity also entails a bridging of boundaries or gaps in a social sense. “Solidarity *with*” suggests that, similar to the depiction of charity above, Party A is not directly affected by the circumstances, but

has sensitivity, sympathy, or empathy for Party B. Furthermore, these bonds compel Party A to *do something* to alleviate the suffering of Party B, beyond a charitable gesture. To act in solidarity with someone is to stake an investment in the success of their struggle, issue, or campaign. Solidarity is a connection between people and groups and a demonstration of affinity and mutual reliability. That investment takes various forms: marching in solidarity, voicing solidarity in a letter or a phone call, and generally supporting the self-determination and security of an other. Solidarity is an expression of direct action, and charity is an indirect expression of action through proxy. This is not a normative judgment of one or the other, but a qualified distinction of expressions of human rights engagement; whether one type of expression is more effective than the other is an empirical matter to be adjudicated case-by-case.

However, acts of solidarity provide the building blocks for a viable political movement, while charity serves only as a short-term fix. This conclusion analytically re-establishes the relationship linking charity and humanitarianism, and solidarity and human rights, respectively. As well, we are able to place examples from the chapters in context as popular expressions of citizen activism fall at points along this charity-solidarity spectrum. The trends that emerged during Live Aid and continued in the campaign to Save Darfur that relied on merchandising and simple donation can be characterized as useful contributions, but based on weak ties. More overtly political action, such as that in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, in the case of Bosnia around 1995, and in rallies for Darfur, are examples of solidarist efforts between Western civilians and those suffering from abuse in other countries. From the perspective of the average audience member, charity is an easier extension of one's self, while solidarity in its pure

form demands a deeper commitment because of the risk involved (be it social or political risk). Put bluntly, acts of solidarity are courageous expressions that necessarily entail sacrifice, while charity is often a singular act with minimal impact on one's own welfare and the welfare of the recipient. While acts of charity are better than not acting at all, it is a mistake to suggest that charity alone can have a positive effect on systemic human rights abuse or structural suffering of any kind. It is one thing to be able to provide rice in a complex emergency and quite another matter to empower individuals to motivate their own governments to provide for the populace. Humanitarianism rests of the former and human rights on the latter. The final explanatory category is the dependent variable of "commitment," which will be explored through brief snapshots of recent human rights events and phenomena and the responses from civil society.

### **Commitments**

The strategies and methods initiated throughout the episodes in the chapters are very alive today and, in important ways, persist in shaping ordinary citizens' associations with ethical political behavior. Throughout Chapters Two, Three and Four, modes of popular culture were introduced as platforms for human rights activism; each chapter illustrating how a unique feature of pop culture manifested itself as an activist tool. Trends in each episode demonstrate the potential for these new instruments to serve a useful purpose, while also highlighting tendencies toward the manifold commercial facets of popular culture. It is this tension that propels the argument forward, teasing at what is possible, wary of unintended consequences. Concern over *commitment* is at once central, as well as peripheral, depending on strategic prioritization. From the stance of the campaign, it may be sufficient to register a one-time commitment from a supporter that

advances the campaign along. From the perspective of the movement, commitment is something conjured and relied upon over time. As human rights abuse continues to arise, the long-term advocate may be the key to success—or perhaps the periodic involvement of the one-timer is a more predictable approach. To evaluate the role of popular culture in the constitution of the human rights movement, this section looks at the three modes that emerge in the chapters in the context of their materialization in recent events:

consumerism, in the case of the RED campaign; voyeurism, in the incident at Abu Ghraib prison; and brand identity, through the intervention in Libya. The last decade has presented the human rights movement with many challenges that, sadly, it has not dealt with gracefully, suggesting the deep limitations of the popular culture approach. These are three exemplary instances in which this is true.

### Consumption: Product (RED)

The argument in Chapter 2 addresses the integration of patterns of consumerism into a model for recruitment, fundraising, and advocacy. From the modest Amnesty International benefit shows to the extravagance of Live Aid and the militancy of the Anti-Apartheid movement, campaign engineers institutionalized commercial aspects into activism as a means of expanding and empowering a grassroots base. I suggest that the range of market-based initiatives in this period presented opportunities for new demographics to become aware of and involved in human rights and humanitarian campaigns, yet in an alienated and uncertain way. Wide-ranging and diverse programs created a hive of activity that linked popular cultural products and consumerism to human rights. The underlying assumption in this approach is as follows: ordinary people can participate in ethical, globally-oriented action through channels with which they are



already familiar, with minimal discomfort and even some self-indulgent satisfaction. There is an incongruity in this arrangement that assumes significant sacrifice is unnecessary in political struggle, reflecting a disjointed relationship between principle and action. In the case of Anti-Apartheid this is slightly different in that participants in the cultural boycott did shift their purchasing habits, keeping in mind the businesses they were patronizing. If a business had ties to the white government, they were shunned, forcing the consumer to adjust her spending. One lesson drawn from this period is that, the most overtly political commitment in this trajectory only required a mild deviation from daily life—and was the most successful. Therefore, should movement organizers design campaigns along the lines of these dictates, a solidarity effort with staying power can emerge. However, in terms of consumption-based efforts aimed at the alleviation of suffering, the tendency has been towards limited engagement framed as charity.

This is especially evident in the Product (RED) Campaign. An aggregation of celebrities, consumer capitalism, and humanitarian impulses, (RED) is the brainchild of Bono, the U2 front man and Live Aid alum, that emerged along with a flurry of other similar activity, including Jubilee 2000 and ONE: The Campaign to Make Poverty History. Along with Bobby Shriver, the initiative launched in 2006 in conjunction with the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland to bring attention to the ills of global capitalism, as well as the opportunities. These campaigns and organizations focused primarily on economic justice issues, such as Third World debt relief and the Millennium Development Goals, and global health concerns like Malaria, Tuberculosis, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Product (RED) is essentially a marketing campaign in which a percentage of sales of certain products from certain corporations benefit the Global Fund,

which distributes anti-retroviral (ARVs) drugs in Africa to those who have contracted HIV. Participating corporations include Nike, Gap, Apple, American Express, Dell, Converse, Armani and Starbucks. Each sells specific commodities to proceed (RED) in what can be described as a mutually beneficial relationship: It “is not a charity. It is simply a business model” (Quoted in Shoumatoff 2007), and coincides with trends in the corporate sector towards social responsibility, good citizenship, and philanthropy (Ponte, Richey, and Baab 2009). Involvement in ethical campaigns such as this one projects an image of the corporation as concerned with human well-being, despite frequently being the target of human rights activism. However, and skillfully, Bono describes this as a “judo strategy” in which you use “the strength of your opponent to overthrow him” (Shoumatoff 2007).

Similar to the cases of Chapter 2, (RED) channels trends in consumer behavior in the service of an ethical cause, in this case treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Consumers may seek out products with the (RED) logo with the knowledge that through their act of self-indulgence (the purchase of a non-essential luxury good: designer running shoes, hip portable music player, or flashy watch), a stranger suffering from an incurable virus will receive a lifeline. This element is not simply a selling point: the consequence of the Global Fund’s efforts has been described as the Lazarus Effect, referring to a tale from the Gospel in which “Jesus raises a man named Lazarus from the dead, and in essence that’s what these drugs are doing for people with aids [*sic*]” (Shoumatoff 2007). “Since its launch in 2006, (RED) has generated over \$170 million for the Global Fund and over 7.5 million people have been impacted” (Product (RED) 2011). While the perspective of this research project has been critical, certain facts are

incontrovertible and, in this case, it is obviously better that HIV patients have access to ARVs than not. Similarly with Live Aid, despite the debates over its superficiality and excessive display, the hundred of millions of dollars earmarked for development projects in East Africa is difficult to dismiss.

There are criticisms nonetheless commenting on the objectification of Africa by the (RED) Campaign: “Profligate consumption, corporate growth, and shareholder profit become the means to Africa’s redemption and to the personal salvation of these sophisticates” (Hintzen 2008, 79). With an anti-capitalist flourish, the emphasis on spending as a force for social good is declared an expression of “reified neoliberalism” and “a convenient First World way of assuaging liberal guilt through shopping” (Youde 2009, 201). Finally, when the magazine *Advertising Age* tallied the numbers in 2007, the balance sheets demonstrated over \$100 million in marketing expenses by the participating corporations, with Product (RED) taking in around \$18 million (Frazier 2007). While \$18 million is better than nothing, there remains a disproportionate nature to the campaign that prioritizes marketing over the humanitarian objectives it espouses. This trend is susceptible to criticism from many angles, but it has etched a deeply significant impression into consumer culture and remains a fixture of the marketplace.

This phenomenon—the linkage of mass consumption and human rights—is known by many names: ethical consumerism, political consumerism, cause-driven marketing, “latte activism” (Quoted in Mortimer 2007), “compassionate consumption,” “causerism,” or “brand aid” (Richey and Ponte 2011). Labels and logos appear on commodity goods, as producers catch up with consumer fashion. These visual indicators signal to the consumer that it is morally acceptable to purchase the goods. I believe this

pervasive shift in consumer culture has its roots in the events of the 1980s, when consumer capitalism was hitting its stride, and celebrities sought to direct this energy towards social and political problems. I am convinced of this because when Bono or Sting or Peter Gabriel are interviewed and asked about the origins of their activism, they each cite their involvement in the Secret Policeman's Ball and Live Aid as foundational. This is true of content as much as it is of form.

However, in the past thirty years, there has been a fundamental cultural shift that is a product of the events of this earlier period. "Diego Scotti, vice president of global advertising for American Express [a (RED) partner], explains: 'In the 80s, having money was the sign that someone was successful and prestigious. Today, paying attention to what happens around you and not only being centred [sic] on yourself is reassuring for your self-image, as well as how other people see you'" (Mortimer 2007). There remains a status element to consumerism that now includes morality and political behavior. While boycotting has a history that can be traced back at least to the Boston Tea Party, "buycotting" is not the evasion of unethical business, but a predilection in favor of businesses that tout their social responsibilities (Giridharadas 2009). Causes and issues abound and range from labor conditions for workers to ecological impact: fair trade coffee, conflict-free diamonds and minerals, and green resource extraction. Yet, this is but a modest expression of commitment from consumers. Brand loyalty may compel patterned purchasing, but should the fad drift with the breeze, the ethical and political concerns that accompany mass consumption are certain to fade away.

### Voyeurism: Abu Ghraib Prison

Chapter 3 weaves a narrative about the effect of visual media culture on the audience's ability to mobilize for human rights. As technology advanced by leaps and bounds, it became possible for viewers in the West to witness global events in real time on their television screens, from the safety of their living rooms. While this presented the possibility for cosmopolitan sensibilities to build bridges between Western spectators and suffering strangers, there was also evidence that this very human and very tragic event—suffering mediated through television—was transformed into a spectacle. Spectacle produced two simultaneous effects: the audience member becomes alienated from that subject on television, and the subject herself becomes objectified. In this context, the human rights community demonstrated an ability to use graphic imagery as a means for riling up an otherwise-apathetic audience, but, again, in an apolitical capacity. Coverage succeeded in capturing static moments and discrete incidents, rather than exposing the systemic qualities of the conflicts in Somalia and Bosnia: snapshots and highlight reels, but no coherent plot. Therefore, the audience responded to the images with emotional and moral responses, but not political ones. Political responses require a structural awareness of the exercise of power that transcends feelings and even morals. Furthermore, these episodes evidence the way in which spectacle is a readily co-optable phenomenon as all actors involved attempted to exert control over the image—from Presidents Bush and Clinton, to Somali soldiers and Serbian thugs (not to mention the mainstream media outlets). Human rights organizations failed to assert propriety over the spectacle,

allowing indignity to be the substance of spin and subjectivity. Graphic imagery motivates a limited commitment that is beholden to the dictates of the news cycle and is ill-equipped as a basis for the sustained and indefatigable resolve necessary to properly address human rights crises.

The spectacle of suffering remains a common feature of mainstream news coverage and made a notorious return to primetime in the scandal of detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In 2004, a *60 Minutes II* broadcast revealed to the world first-hand photographs of the brutal treatment of Iraqi detainees by American military personnel. Seared into the memories of viewers, the images pictured nude captives in a human pile; shackled prisoners covered in feces; cuffed detainees threatened by Belgian shepherds; leashed, battered, bruised, and bloody Iraqis; and one prisoner hooded, caped, and hooked up to electrodes positioned with his palms up, as if Christ-like. If the realities of the photographs were insufficient to offend, American guards flanked many of the subjects, smiling and giving gleeful thumbs-up. Reactions to the news enflamed the politics surrounding a war that was about to erupt into sectarian civil conflict. The photographs personified for many the aggression of the US invasion of Iraq, as well as exposed the lack of oversight and discipline of the American military. A public debate about torture raged in the wake of the scandal, but was largely limited to whether or not the events at Abu Ghraib constituted cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment; the discussion expanded into the practices of interrogation and intelligence gathering underway in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and secret CIA black sites, all operating under the auspices of the Bush Administration's "war on terror." Yet, despite

the at-times vigorous debate and the disgust experienced by the audience, the question of accountability remains virtually unanswered.

It is clear that the torture at Abu Ghraib prison was not perpetrated by a handful of “bad apples” but is symptomatic of a culture constituted by rules of engagement properly understood as lax, inconsistent, or non-existent. Evidence suggests that it was not uncommon for interrogators to ask military police (MPs) to “soften up” detainees ahead of interrogation sessions, despite many MPs, such as those at Abu Ghraib, never having been trained in proper detention protocol. Furthermore, a context for this sort of behavior was provided by a series of legal memos originating in the Office of Legal Counsel of the Justice Department. These documents, known collectively as the Torture Memos, set out standards of conduct for interrogators that effectively sidestepped international legal norms of torture and permitted a range of practices, including waterboarding, the use of stress positions, and sleep deprivation (Farer 2008, 99-111). In light of the fact that torture was authorized directly by the Justice Department, governing the CIA and Department of Defense, there has been no accountability for torture above low-ranking soldiers. When asked about Abu Ghraib, or other instances of detainee torture, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld roundly denied any prior knowledge, contrary to the findings of the Taguba Report, the thorough accounting of torture at Abu Ghraib, conducted by Army Major General Antonio Taguba (Hersh 2007).

A 2006 report authored by the Detainee Abuse and Accountability Project (or DAA Project, a collaboration between Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, and the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at NYU School of Law) uncovered that torture was in fact a widespread practice carried out in the “war on terror”. The DAA

Project examined over 330 cases in which detainees were either abused or killed in custody of American military or civilian personnel (to include contractors). These cases “involve more than 600 U.S. personnel and over 460 detainees,” yet no more than fifty-four military personnel have been convicted in court martial and only forty have served any prison time—and “no U.S. military officer has been held accountable for criminal acts committed by subordinates” (Detainee Abuse and Accountability Project 2006). Of these cases, “only about half appear to have been properly investigated” (Detainee Abuse and Accountability Project 2006). In a 2011 investigation, the Detainee Abuse Task Force, a military body established in the wake of Abu Ghraib, is exposed for high levels of incompetence and corruption (Phillips 2011). The startling array of investigations proves that torture was a pervasive feature of military conduct and extended well beyond the “borderline” method of waterboarding, to include the foulest and most humiliating treatment undeserving of detailed exposition. Yet, damning as this reporting is for the civilian and military command of the “war on terror,” prosecutions of high-ranking officials are conspicuously absent. What explains, then, the disconnect between the horror of the photographs and the lack of accountability for those responsible?

If the spectacle of suffering were a force for human rights protection, then it would motivate a repulsed audience to rally for a response. Instead, the spectacle of Abu Ghraib operated in similar fashion to the spectacle of Bosnian concentration camps: as an instance captured, and a system obscured. In 1992, at Omarska and Trnopolje, the popular reaction to the images was to have those camps closed, rather than a thorough examination of the campaign of extermination in its early stages. The glimpse into brutality offered by the spectacle does not penetrate beneath the surface and does harm to



the possibility of a coherent accounting of the problem; to use a colloquialism, the forest is lost but for the trees. From the viewer's perspective, the spectacle maintains distance from the suffering subject as spectatorship and witnessing is transformed into voyeurism. Voyeurism is a unidirectional act that objectifies its content and disengages the voyeur from action. The spectacle, as transmitted through mass media, provokes emotional and moral expressions that fail to transcend the medium or to translate into deeper political commitments.

### Brand Identity: Libya

In the analysis of the campaign to Save Darfur, a movement emerged as a progressive synthesis of the previous moments, deploying celebrities and consumerism, and leveraging visual media culture. Yet, through a strategy that is at once transcendent and derivative, Save Darfur's grassroots activism was outsourced to a host of corporate marketing firms that executed an all-out advertising blitz to raise awareness, expose wrongdoing, and exact political cost among elected officials. While this approach cast Darfur as *the* humanitarian cause of the moment and produced noticeable policy shifts, the nature of advertising is to rely on the audience's identification with "the brand," no matter what the cost. In the case of Darfur, genocide was transformed into a brand name despite the dubious circumstances surrounding the very declaration of genocide. I suggest that the advertising initiative became an end unto itself and, in the process, distorted the facts on the ground so as to maintain its branded narrative. On the audience side of the equation, a brand identity is formed through the merchandising and advertising campaigns, as bumper stickers and t-shirts became self-affirming products for supporters to don. This is not to discredit the efforts expended and successes won by the movement,

but to propose an explanation as to why activists did not ultimately see their objectives accomplished. Save Darfur is appropriately compared to the Anti-Apartheid movement for its broad civil society base and its effectiveness in motivating average people and heads of state confront a massive human rights problem. However, if Save Darfur is the model for future campaigns, an introspective account of its methods reveals the need to re-think some core assumptions. In an attempt to motivate a political response, the politically charged language of genocide figured heavily in movement literature, talking points, and advertising. Yet, there is a sense in which Save Darfur's approach resulted in either an overly political or falsely political output.

This is reflected in the recent intervention in Libya and the rhetoric and positioning that surrounded the military campaign. As the Arab Spring uprisings spiraled from Tunisia and Egypt outward, a non-violent protest movement sprung up in Benghazi, Libya. Over the course of a week, the protests turned violent when the police used force to disburse the demonstrations. As the protests became enflamed, police presence subsided and the movement occupied Benghazi, claiming it as the rebel capitol; indeed, in a short span the protest movement evolved into a revolt against the dictatorial regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Gaddafi responded with a war mobilization and grave threats against the rebels and their sympathizers: calling the protestors "cockroaches" and "rats" and encouraging his supporters to hunt them down in their homes (The Economist 2011). A city of 700,000, Benghazi risked a thorough assault from the Libyan state that endangered the lives of its civilians. Reacting to the threat against the rebel stronghold, the United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 1970 and 1973, the first condemning Gaddafi's violence and the second authorizing the imposition of a no-fly

zone for the purpose of protecting civilians. A multi-lateral force lead by France, UK, and US began enforcing the no-fly zone with an aerial assault on Libya's retaliatory capabilities, taking out communications systems and pocking runways. Yet, as the conflict raged, the allied forces appeared to be providing tactical air support for the rebels, rather than preventing crimes against humanity.

The intervention in Libya, presented to the international community as a humanitarian act and an expression of the emergent Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, doubled as a strategic campaign aimed at the removal of Colonel Gaddafi. As clear as that is in the months following its initiation, early on, human rights language helped sell the military operation to the public. Primary among the justifications for the intervention, as indicated above, is the protection of civilians against the threats of terror by the Gaddafi regime. Yet, there are two kinds of civilians in Benghazi: those that have taken up weapons against the state, and those who have not, despite the comfort and material support the latter might be lending to the former. However, as the airstrikes intensified over Tripoli, targeting the residence of Gaddafi, the mantra of civilian protection persists. It becomes reasonable when both kinds of civilians are subsumed under the category of those requiring protection—since the future of Libya is dependent upon the civilian combatants *qua* rebels. This is no longer the limited engagement called up under Resolution 1973 and has morphed into an aggressive attempt to unseat a dictator. However horrific Gaddafi is, and he is among the most heavy-handed, regime change is not a human rights directive and, in this case, humanitarian discourse has been manipulated to serve the interests of great powers.

In the context of brand identity, the linkage between Darfur and Libya suggests that labels such as “genocide” and “mass atrocities” are embedded with meaning that resonates with the audience. If in Darfur Rwanda served as the historic backdrop, Benghazi was cast as a Srebrenica in the making: an area able to be surrounded, full of innocent civilians, at the mercy of a brutal army. Whether or not this is an apt comparison is a worthwhile debate to have, but ultimately rests on counterfactuals and negative events. Samantha Power, the journalist galvanized by Bosnia, now holds a prominent role on President Barack Obama’s National Security Council and was a vocal proponent of military action in Libya (Stolberg 2011). The cultural memory of Srebrenica bears significant weight among policymakers, as well as home viewers, and was an effective parallel case in convincing the American public and world of the value of the intervention. Either the campaign prevented a large-scale massacre, as the Obama Administration and others suggest, or this is a case of crying wolf to justify an aggressive attack on a rogue state. Perhaps there are some that wish R2P to extend to these kinds of cases, to justify a multilateral military effort to remove a notorious human rights violator. But, if this is the case, then Iraq 2003 bears more of a resemblance to Libya than Bosnia and, for that reason, should be a source of controversy for the human rights community.

However, instead of cautious pause and self-reflection, central organizations—including the Genocide Intervention Network—were quick to call for military action and flex their anti-genocide brand. There is no evidence that a genocidal threat was ever issued from Gaddafi and for an organization with the word “genocide” in its name to speak out on Libya is to falsely superimpose the brand of genocide where it does not apply. Ultimately, the case of Libya—unresolved at the time of writing—demonstrates

promise for quick action through a multilateral body on behalf of vulnerable civilians and resolve to expend political capital in support of human rights. Yet, I fear that the currency of human rights is limited and therefore dictates a budgeted approach. It will not be possible to act in this manner in all cases (witness Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain), and while acting infrequently is preferable to not acting, humanitarian interventions are best reserved for cases of the worst magnitude. Long-term considerations weigh in favor of a measured perspective that defends human rights interests against geopolitical co-optation. The Darfur case teaches us that citizen advocates respond to appeals to tragic cultural memories and brands that identify supporters as conscious, ethical and globally engaged. But, commitments forged through such tactics have infamously lent themselves to deceptive outreach practices and susceptibility to manipulation.

### **Conclusion: What Was Not and What Can Be**

This project is a descriptive account of the emergence of a mass consciousness revolving around human rights principles and the methods that were used to bring it about. As well, a critical frame is employed to highlight the negative unintended consequences produced by these strategies for recruitment, fundraising, and advocacy. Ultimately, the conclusion drawn from the research suggests that popular culture is useful in attracting supporters to ethical causes, but damaging to the possibility of politicizing those supporters and transforming them into activists. The final analysis paints a picture of the human rights movement as reliant on commercial platforms, but at their own expense. Individuals that become involved in human rights campaigns do not constitute a base of support for future campaigns, but are only bound to human rights principles in superficial ways. In light of this conclusion, this section proposes a hypothetical history

and an alternate future in which the human rights movement successfully politicizes its supporters and is able to influence world affairs more effectively.

A politicized global human rights movement must come to terms with the series of dialectics presented in this dissertation: other-regarding and self-determining movements; charity and solidarity; and human rights and humanitarianism. As discussed above, each of these binaries frame the relationship between the Western advocate and the suffering stranger whose pain she hopes to alleviate. I contend this relationship drives the motivations, expressions, and commitments of advocates and determines the constitution of any mass movement that should materialize. If this relationship is defined by distance and alienation, then a unilateral, charity-based effort will develop. If this relationship is instead based on cosmopolitan obligations, an empowering solidarity movement will take shape. The cases in the chapters provide evidence of both, but demonstrate that, in an age of consumerism, we are more likely to witness charitable gestures than solidarist stances.

Foremost, the other-regarding/self-determining distinction needs to be fleshed out in the context of global human rights activism: while the movement is based on notions of the former, the latter fosters a deeper sense of politicization among participants. Therefore, the question remains, how does the human rights movement bridge this gap? In the classic social protest model, politicization derives from the individual's personal experience and self-interest in the struggle (motivation), the participation in direct action campaigns (expression), and the specific assumption of risk and threat in the process (commitment). At a glance, these are not easily reproduced in the context of an other-regarding movement. There are examples of Westerners who take part in direct action

and transplant themselves into harm's way for the sake of the cause; American and European supporters of Palestinian statehood are one such group that relocate to the West Bank and Gaza Strip and actively engage in local protests. But, for the most part, concerned people in the West do not take on threat of bodily harm or social repercussions when the rights of strangers are in question. To reiterate a point made in Chapter One, there are in fact examples of this in history, such as the Freedom Rides in the early 1960s American South, but they are rare and were not transnational actions. Since this kind of first-hand, risk-inducing experience is unavailable, what can serve as a substitute to politicize those inclined toward these matters?

One response may suggest that it is actually impossible to politicize Western audiences to the extent necessary to overcome geographic and psychological distance. This is not an unreasonable suggestion. While we might like it to be otherwise, a humble approach to human rights organizing may recognize these inherent limitations and opt to pursue alternate paths. Perhaps the best we can hope for is a charitable reaction in which resources are generated, awareness is raised, and elected officials are compelled to stake out positions and acknowledge the problem, such as we saw in Save Darfur. In the case of famine, for instance, maybe our objectives should be limited to emergence aid relief and some modest development efforts, like water sanitation projects. Clearly it was silly for Bob Geldof to strive to end poverty and were he to have set his goals lower, Live Aid may be remembered as a greater success. Humanitarian hubris is that which most often leads to the worst outcomes, signaling the need for a degree of self-restraint that adventurous do-gooders rarely possess. The utopian and aspirational elements inherent in

the principles of human rights certainly do not prescribe caution, but rather embolden the courageous and the confrontational.

Whereas the argument for self-restraint and limitation may be reasonable, it is not particularly satisfying, nor is it likely to have the desired impact in a time of crisis. This being the case, how can human rights organizations politicize civil society while waging campaigns for the rights of others? At the crux of this question is the advocate's potential to overcome the seduction of consumer culture and resist the tide of the news cycle, and I believe this potential can be realized if the human rights movement comes to expect more of its supporters. Throughout this broad narrative, tactics pre-figured the audience's response to be limited and disengaged. Expecting little, movement architects could take pleasure in the progress made in the realm of consciousness, although the realm of politics was noticeably deficient. Bringing these two arenas into alignment will allow human rights organizations to capitalize on the promise of cosmopolitanism solidarity embodied in the vociferous and impressive expressions evidenced in the chapters.

Because nothing of this sort had ever been demonstrated, it is understandable that the campaigns required limited engagement from the public. In a sense, contemporary human rights activism is far cry from the self-determining movements that preceded it and to which it owes a debt. Because of the utilization of the popular culture model, human rights supporters today can be involved without leaving the comfort of their living rooms. While it is a benefit to be able to send a letter of protest via email, rather than having to travel to an embassy, these kinds of processes also set a tone of the movement as inherently removed and only inclined to participate so long as they are not discomforted. This is at the heart of the problem. It was sufficient to ask the audience to



give money to aid in Ethiopia. It corroborated the aims of the movement for viewers to become upset at the site of graphic imagery of suffering. To have created a mass movement for Darfur was a landmark in the recent history of human rights. In each of these moments, however, the human rights community should have asked for more. Live Aid could have had a political component that issued actions to address the real root of the famine in the use of food as a weapon in war. The imagery of starvation in Somalia and genocide in Bosnia could have provided the wherewithal to foment a grassroots enterprise based on connecting the dots, rather than supplying fuel for a reactionary emotional response. In Darfur, the advertising push should have been reigned in to exploit the attention it had garnered, rather than be allowed to become the subject of controversy. Once fits of energy had begun to percolate, the leaders of the movement should have shifted objectives from the social and culture aspects of the campaigns, triggering a political agenda derived from the principles of universal human rights.

On the one hand, this analysis sounds like “Monday morning quarterbacking” or “sour grapes” hindsight of the highest magnitude because it is easy to read backwards into history options that now are apparent. But that is not the goal of this research. Instead, by engaging in “should haves,” I intend to bring perspective to opportunities missed and possibilities squandered in order to improve future practice. This is not an exercise in empty criticism for its own sake, but rather an attempt to explain how we got to this point and how we make things better. There was and continues to be a steep learning curve in the design and execution of human rights campaigning and the popular culture approach is a natural one because it sought generally to generate consciousness for human rights activism that previously did not exist—and in that goal these methods

proved effective. However, aside from the Anti-Apartheid Movement, awareness never surged into politicized activism. In these cases, there appears to be a lack of staging in the campaigns to answer the question, once we have an interested public, what do we do?

The answer to this pivotal issue rests on our expectations of ordinary people's abilities to act on behalf of others; not just others in our own communities, but others on the other side of the world. This research project demonstrates that ordinary people have the capacity for compassion and solidarity of a cosmopolitan variety, but it is the responsibility of movement leadership to properly leverage emotional and moral engagement into political and politicized action. Contrary to popular myths, average citizens—not lawyers, scholars, or diplomats—are not apathetic or detached; they are just not engaged. If human rights principles are about anything, they are about hope that the future can be better than the present; that oppressed people will claim their inalienable rights, and that those fortunate enough not to need to claim rights will join those others in their struggles. Professor Stephen Eric Bronner forcefully articulates the potential for human rights to realize these goals and is worth quoting at length:

Human rights is useful only from the standpoint of critique and resistance. It projects a form of solidarity that is more than legal and extends beyond the limits of class, race, and nation... Human rights is a meaningful concept only insofar as similarities are recognized between such different individuals united by nothing more than the willingness to challenge the constraints of tradition and the dictates of arbitrary power. Human rights is predicated on an existential willingness to feel empathy and compassion for the victim, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised. (Bronner 2004, 145-146)

Human rights has been called “the last coherent saving ideal” and “the last utopia” for the motivational nature of its substance, in an age without compelling progressive ideologies

(Rieff 2003, 120; Moyn 2010). Consumerism is conspicuous for the absence and denial of ideology, in favor of a self-indulgent mantra that prioritizes the purposeless accumulation of stuff. For this reason, this dissertation hinges on the constant tension between the usefulness of commercialism as a platform for human rights and the negative unintended consequences associated with the offspring of this rocky marriage.

Human rights activism demands investment by supporters that supersedes a momentary flare up of emotion or outrage and it is the duty of the human rights movement to cultivate and nurture a sense of ownership in the public. Citizen advocates must develop a sense of propriety that is not delimited by an annual contribution or by affixing a bumper sticker. Human rights engagement that links integrity with action can be effective in fostering a “human rights culture” in a real sense by casting average people in the roles of activists. The human rights movement consists of much more than NGOs, philanthropists, journalists, and lawyers. The movement was built by the energies of ordinary people concerned with the well-being of suffering strangers and, in order to be successful, the movement must embrace and exploit these grassroots moving forward. Through this embrace, however, the movement must shift away from the weak ties and hollow bonds of its past and toward the politicized and principled promise of its future.

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